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UPDATE


Cover art by Phil Pell
POWERFUL ARTICLES

T HANK YOU FOR YOUR POWERFUL and thought-provoking set of articles in the July 2008 issue.

When I finished reading the article, “When Virgins Collide,” I wept for all those who missed out on the pleasure of sex for long or short periods of time because they lacked knowledge about the love-making process. I wept for the women who have so often felt inadequate, and also for women throughout history who have been ravaged, wounded, and abused by sex instead of experiencing the joy and deep bonding that is possible in a loving, committed relationship.

I grieved for women such as the one who came to see my urologist husband. She wanted to make sure that she did not give her husband Viagra, “Because he had his way with me for forty years and it’s my time now.” I also grieved for the women victimized by systematic rape as part of the ethnic cleansing in places such as Bosnia.

I appreciated the questions and suggestions offered by Stephen Carter, Anne Arnold, and H. Wayne Schow about how to better teach both the consequences and the joy of love-making. They inspired me to continue thinking about how to put into words all that I have learned, and how to continue to learn, about love-making, which I have experienced as a powerful connection to the divine.

I marvel at the huge gulf between the deep pain and the exquisite joy this gift can evoke.

RONDA CALLISTER
Logan, Utah

LET’S TALK ABOUT SEX

I JUST FINISHED READING “AFRAID OF the Dark” in the July 2008 issue, and found that my experience growing up in the Church was very similar. While I thoroughly enjoyed this article and the others, I wonder if perhaps faithful Mormons, when attempting to liberalize the Church’s approach to sexuality, are looking at the challenge incorrectly.

All the articles refer to sexuality as a mystical or dark place, or something sacred that we must to help our kids understand without all the guilt and shame associated with this “sin next to murder.” In other words, I wonder if there is still an overemphasis on sexuality itself.

Why do we need to always talk about sex as God’s gift? I think that elevates its importance too much and places unneeded burdens on youth and parents attempting to deal with it. Sex is scary enough psychologically. Why make it even more unsettling by placing a spiritual overlay on it?

As for chastity before temple marriage, I have found that often, instead of making sexuality less of an issue in finding the right mate, the aggrandizement of sexuality seems to become the issue that trumps all others.

At age fourteen, I joined the Church and entered puberty. Since I lived in the mission field and all my friends were non-Mormons, I saw them enter their sexually active years at the same time I was subject to Boyd K. Packer’s “little factory” talk. A relatively obedient teenage boy, I “slipped” on masturbation once every month or two, feeling ashamed and guilty enough that I went through the perfunctory bishop interview to get myself straight with the Lord. Fortunately I had some pretty cool bishops who took the issue less seriously than I did.

What really struck me at the time, though, was what a non-event masturbation was to me. It was no different for me than one of my non-Mormon and relatively non-religious friends. I found their language and behavior very crude and offensive, but held my tongue because I simply didn’t think I knew enough to know how to relate to their behavior constructively. However, I’ve followed the lives of some of my friends, and many went on to lead happy and fulfilling lives, despite the dire predictions of my Sunday school lessons.

I now have two boys and a girl. My boys are 16 and 14 and are in what I call the “shower” phase of their lives. I’ve had conversations with my sons that I never received from my Church leaders or my Mormon friends. Essentially I’ve told them that I think masturbation is like picking your nose or having a bowel movement: it feels good, but don’t want to do it in public.

I don’t mean to make light of the sexual changes they are experiencing, but I’ve found that by viewing sexuality as simply another body function (albeit one that can carry serious consequences if misused), my boys are growing up with a very healthy sense of themselves and their sexuality. I counsel them not to have sexual relations at their age, and use the analogy of learning to use a gun. If they are not careful, they can easily shoot off their foot, or shoot themselves in the head. I drove that point home to my 14-year-old.
old who had learned of a pregnancy in his high school and how the lives of the boy and girl involved were changed forever. I find it so much easier to describe sexual behavior differently than other risky behaviors, such as taking drugs or drinking alcohol at their age. Since drug use and alcohol consumption are entirely voluntary (unlike all the desires that hormones prompt), I can be pretty hardcore about insisting my sons not take drugs or alcohol because it is not age appropriate. But when it comes to intimate sexual relationships at their age, I tell them they just aren’t ready. Because my wife and I have a close relationship with our kids, I’ve found this approach much more effective than anything the Church has ever presented.

WESLEY SMITH
Park City, Utah

NAKED LIKE UNTO THE PROPHET?

T HANKS TO MICHAEL MARTINDALE for sharing his experiences as a Mormon nudist (SUNSTONE, July 2008), which resonate with an article I wrote in which I asked whether the Mormon fixation with modesty could be simply a form of erotophobia (SUNSTONE, July 2004, 52–53).

Martindale says he was asked if he could imagine President Hinckley “doing things naked.” My response is that I can imagine President Heber J. Grant swimming in the nude, since there are stories about him doing exactly that in the old Deseret Gym swimming pool in the days when the sexes were strictly segregated.

As for the spring in Diamond Fork that Martindale mentions, it is well known that many Utahns, including temple recommend-holding Mormons, have been skinny-dipping in that remote place for decades.

But I call attention to an irony implicit in Martindale’s feelings of “apprehension” when, as he entered the temple after his first experience as a naturist, he asked himself whether “an evil spirit [would follow him] inside.” Many Mormons have had similar feelings of apprehension as they entered the temple for the first time because they knew (or suspected) that they would be asked to undress and begin that rite of passage practically nude—a practice that only recently has been discontinued.

I suspect one of the reasons many temple-worthy Mormons feel safe skinny-dipping in Diamond Fork is that a large sign on one of the bridges that hikers cross on the way (reading something like “WARNING! SKINNY-DIPPING AHEAD!”) both warns and invites people to be part of an experience which, as Martindale says, made him feel “a deep connectedness . . . with God’s creation.” An anthropologist could easily find similarities between the Diamond Fork bridge and the temple gates: Both could be interpreted as clearly marked thresholds that warn and invite the pilgrim/hiker to a new behavioral pattern—to do something that flaunts the most basic of social conventions.

Would it be sacrilegious to conclude that removing one’s clothes at both thresholds are rites of passage that similarly mark the beginning of a mystical experience?

HUGO OLAIZ
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

WILL THE REAL VICTIM PLEASE STAND UP?

T HANK-YOU TO SUNSTONE FOR providing me an opportunity to respond to Ashley Sanders’s rebuttal that appeared in the July 2008 SUNSTONE. In hindsight, I should not have engaged in hypocrisy by suggesting that the author intentionally cooked facts to support partisan interpretations. I guess I’ve become too cynical about people’s motives in this politically charged election cycle.

Certainly, I agree with Sanders’s macro theme that over time, the LDS Church has taken contradictory positions on political issues. In 2006, I highlighted this same dynamic in a Sunday op-ed published in the Salt Lake Tribune. The op-ed explored the ironies over a century of the LDS Church’s differing positions on a U.S. constitutional amendment defining marriage. During Apostle Reed Smoot’s first term as a US senator (1903-1909), both he and Mormon president Joseph F. Smith opposed the proposed marriage constitutional amendment. A century later, the Church paradoxically and publicly supported a similar marriage amendment (see Michael Paulos, Salt Lake Tribune, “A Century Ago: The LDS Church and Constitutional Amendments,” 11 June 2006). Though not mentioned in her piece, this episode further illustrates the conceptual “tension” Sanders refers to.

As she points out, some violent warts have besmirched the face of Mormon history. She states that Mormons responded to “an imperialistic U.S. government” by “resort[ing] to guerrilla tactics.” I’m assuming that Sanders here is primarily referring to the Mountain Meadows Massacre—the most reprehensible act of violence in all of...
The treachery Mormons exhibited at Mountain Meadows was inexcusable and unforgivable; however, Sanders would need to identify more concrete parallels before I would be comfortable watching it be juxtaposed with atrocities committed by Islamic terrorists. The dissimilarities are many, which include (but are not limited to) the following. First, modern Islamic terrorists engage in suicide bombings, where salvation is reportedly awarded to the perpetrator(s). I am not aware of similar tactics in Mormon history, including the Mountain Meadows Massacre, that even remotely compares to the carefully planned and executed Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks in Kenya and Tanzania (1998), New York City (1993, 2001), Spain (2004), England (2005), and others. I’m also having a difficult time seeing the similarity between Mormonism in Utah during the 19th century and the murderous, fascist Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the early 21st century.

The treachery Mormons exhibited at Mountain Meadows was inexcusable and unforgivable; however, Sanders would need to identify more concrete parallels before I would be comfortable watching it be juxtaposed with atrocities committed by Islamic terrorists. The dissimilarities are many, which include (but are not limited to) the following. First, modern Islamic terrorists engage in suicide bombings, where salvation is reportedly awarded to the perpetrator(s). I am not aware of similar tactics in Mormon history, including the Mountain Meadows Massacre, that even remotely compares to the carefully planned and executed Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks in Kenya and Tanzania (1998), New York City (1993, 2001), Spain (2004), England (2005), and others. I’m also having a difficult time seeing the similarity between Mormonism in Utah during the 19th century and the murderous, fascist Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the early 21st century.

The final paragraph of Sanders’s rebuttal asserts that Mitt Romney and I have “historical amnesia” and “double amnesia” respectively, because we refuse to interpret international terrorism as America’s fault. Defending the interpretation, Sanders states, “what Paulos calls my attempt to ‘blame the victim’ is actually a consistent application of the concepts in my article.” All concepts reach a point where they are no longer constructive. For example, I believe that by applying logic similar to Sanders’s, some Mormon apologists have sought to rationalize the deplorable acts at Mountain Meadows. I don’t think anything productive can be gained from blaming the victim—a lesson the Mormon Church learned the hard way with Mountain Meadows. Moreover, I cannot see a “minority Others” explanation or “historical tension” justification that responsibly supports any thesis that blames victims.

Mike Paulos
San Antonio, Texas

Ashley Sanders responds:

THE ANALOGIES IN my article were meant to emphasize the tension between insiders and outsiders in secular systems that attempt to protect minority and majority rights simultaneously. A secular state often has great difficulty protecting the freedom to and from violence, arguing that it proceeded from two groups with conflicting claims on Constitutional freedoms. I use the word guerrilla to identify a form of violence commonly used by ‘outsiders’ who feel that their freedoms ‘to’ or ‘from’ have been denied and who do not have access to the ‘authorized’ violence of insiders.
believe that guerrilla violence is an expression of a system that cannot protect competing freedoms without contradicting itself; the vigilante/outside nature of guerrilla violence matches the inability of the system to resolve its problems internally.

In this context, I made an analogy between 19th-century Mormons and modern guerrilla violence, since both groups have “rejected pluralism in favor of theocracy, resisted domination by an imperialistic U.S. government, even resorted to guerrilla tactics when threatened with violence.” With that heritage, Romney would seem to be historically tone-deaf if he cannot at least understand how theocratic Muslims resisting U.S. imperialism might resort to similar tactics.

In my article, I never mentioned Al Qaeda or the Taliban. I criticized Mitt Romney for lumping all those who fight against the United States as “evil extremists.” As I said, this categorization betrays double amnesia: First, Romney failed to see a connection between the way a government had characterized his ancestors and the subsequent way they responded. Second, he failed to see why imperialistic U.S. policies toward other countries would engender violent responses from those countries. Romney was not actually talking about right and wrong, terrorism and peace. He was equating ‘right’ and ‘peace’ with whatever actions enjoyed ‘insider’ status and ‘wrong’ and ‘extreme’ with any group relegated to outside status. This logic allows people to say that the United States—a country with an official army and a political structure to legitimize its violence—can invade Iraq with impunity, but that the people of Iraq—lacking insider status and political structure to legitimize its violence—are terrorists simply for trying to fight off an invasion. To call an act “extremist” simply because it conflicts with one’s own interests is misrepresentation. More than that, it is a decay attempting to impute to one’s enemies the philosophy one relies on to maintain power.

This conflation of insiders and outsiders with right and wrong is further illustrated by conversations about the U.S. economy. As Ward Churchill controversially pointed out, we mourned for those who lost their lives on 11 September but rarely memorialize the slower deaths that economic imperialism inflicts. While I would never justify the deaths of those killed on 11 September, I do agree with Churchill that people working in U.S. trade are complicit in a system that deliberately and systematically exploits weaker nations and peoples for the sake of profit. But, since the economy is always on the ‘inside’—since its inequities are supported by a deeply entrenched philosophy of inevitability, and since its crimes are slow and pervasive—we do not recognize the victims of these crimes. Instead, when our economy is threatened, we start wars of self-interest.

In short, we are not the victims nearly as often as we think. And when rare moments arise when we are victims, our overweening indignation betrays a hubris that we could only possess if we are willfully ignorant to the sufferings we had wrought on others. More important, the notion of who is and who is not a victim is a difficult question that can be settled only by taking into account the terms and assumptions of all sides.

We too often tell Mormon history as the history of Mormon victimization. So attached are we to this story that we dismiss or simplify stories that run counter to ours. For both Mormonism and the United States both sides have been, and continue to be, victims—first, of their own hypocrisy, and second, of outside definitions of freedom that are competing with theirs.

ASHLEY SANDERS
Salt Lake City, Utah
FROM THE EDITOR

WHEREIN I JUSTIFY MY EXISTENCE

By Stephen Carter

YES, YOU ARE in the right place. Yes, this is a bona fide SUNSTONE magazine. The only thing that has changed is the editor’s name on the masthead.

Strangely enough, it’s my name.

It kind of scary to see it sidle into its place next to the worthy names of Dan Wooterspoon, Elbert Eugene Peck, Peggy Fletcher Stack, Allen Roberts, and Scott Kenney. I feel like an Osric suddenly called upon to play Hamlet.

Whether there was a divinity that shaped this particular fate of mine, you’ll have to judge for yourself. Let me tell you how I got here.

My story starts in 1997 when I first met Eugene England. He had just become writer-in-residence at Utah Valley State College (now Utah Valley University) and was in the initial stages of planning what is now the Mormon studies program. By a great stroke of luck, he hired me as his administrative assistant, and I became deeply involved in his work. I got to sit in on both private and public scholarly symposia with some of the most interesting people in Mormon studies, such as Armand Mauss, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Jan Shipp, Terryl Givens, and the late Dean May. This period was a formative one for me, because for the first time in my life, I heard Mormonism discussed with discipline, intelligence, and spirit.

I realized only later how unique my tenure with Gene was. Few undergraduates are privileged to take part in gatherings in which religious and scholarly discourse is carried on with such skill and wisdom. I attribute the unique spirit of these meetings to Gene’s commitment to Joseph Smith’s concept of “proving contraries.” When one proves contraries, Gene always argued, you aren’t doing so to identify which is right and which is wrong but to experience the tension between them. It is the experience of dwelling in this tension that makes you wiser.

The scholars Gene brought together were skilled in the art of dwelling in tension. They didn’t jump ship when the conversation got hard. They didn’t bail when someone challenged their ideas. In fact, they saw these moments as opportunities. They knew that ideas can grow only when they are interacting. And the best way to make ideas interact is to put them in tension.

ONLY days after Gene died, I moved to Alaska and began a master of fine arts program in creative writing. Then, just because I could, I also finished a Ph.D. in narrative studies.

During that time, I became fascinated with the structure of stories. I discovered that the great characters of fiction are those who are stretched between two competing values. Think of Asher Lev; stretched between his devotion to his religion and his passion for art. Think of The Merchant of Venice, where justice and mercy vie for the souls of Shylock and Portia.

I also learned that the great stories of the world have second acts. This may seem like a silly thing to say, but so many stories set up the problem (the job of the first act) and then resolve it (the job of the third act) with little to no struggle in between. I’m here to tell you that it’s the struggle that makes a story great, because that’s the time when the opposing forces are at their most powerful, when they wreak their full havoc on the character. Rest assured that any character emerging from the second act without scars is a cheater.

I began to see that Gene was right. Those who dwell in the tension, those who are willing to go through their second act, gain much. Those who jump out too early lose much. Perhaps this is the wisdom behind the adage, “Endure to the end.”

THAT is how the foundation for my passion and commitment to Mormonism was laid. Sunstone is the place where Mormons can come to dwell in the tensions that arise from their religion and from the rest of the world. It happens to all of us. We find ourselves inexpressibly pummeled by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. During these times, we need a place to wrestle in spirit, as Jacob did, as Job did, as Jesus did. It needs to be an independent place; it needs to be open, respectful, and rigorous.

Thus, Sunstone is necessarily a place of labor. No spiritual journey is a primrose path; it is a “steep and thorny way to heaven,” as Hamlet put it. The people you find at Sunstone are not the ones who have jumped. They are the ones who are still trying to navigate their vessels between the whirlpool of Charbydus and the teeth of Scylla. They are the ones who have been brave enough to plunge deep into the second act of their story.

But getting through the second act isn’t the end.

As Elie Wiesel said just a few months ago, “I believe that whatever we receive, we must share. When [I] endure an experience, the experience cannot stay with me alone. It must be opened, it must become an offering; it must be deepened and given and shared.”

The act of composing your story is a heroic journey in itself. “It is essential that the writer undergo the journey,” playwright David Mamet says. “That’s why writing never gets any easier.”

And then we, the audience, become the beneficiary of that double journey. “The true drama … calls for the hero to exercise will,” Mamet continues, “to create in front of us, on the stage, his or her own character, the strength to continue. It is her striving to understand, to correctly assess, to face her own character […] that inspires us—and gives the drama power to cleanse and enrich our own character.”

My editorial philosophy for SUNSTONE will follow in Gene’s tradition. There are contraries all around us, and we will prove them. We will wrestle within their tensions. We will do so with rigor and artistry. We will open the conversation. We will plunge into our second acts. And when we find our way out the other side, we will shape our journey into a story and share it.

As the novelist E. M. Forster writes, “One can, at all events, show one’s own little light here, one’s own poor little trembling flame, with the knowledge that it is not the only light that is shining in the darkness, and not the only one which the darkness does not comprehend.”

NOTES

3. Ibid., 43.
WHAT WE DID AT THE
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JEFFREY NEEDLE, ERIC SAMUELS

313. THE NEW GOD ARGUMENT
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314. SEEING JOSEPH THROUGH JESUS' S EYES
WILLIAM D. RUSSELL, BILL HANSEN

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SUNSTONE • 343 NORTH THIRD WEST • SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH 84103
DEVOTIONAL

LIVING THE MYSTERIES: LOVING THE QUESTIONS

By Frances Lee Menlove

ARE YOU A "without-a-shadow-of-a-doubt" believer? A 100-percenter for all Church teachings? A possessor of great quantities of certitude?

If your answer is, "Well, not really," do not despair. Hold your head up. If you are ripe with questions, you have two heavyweight Biblical champions in your corner. Two tag-teammates who, like you, wrestled with questions bigger than they were—and came out bearing the prize of mystery.

There are two stunning minority reports in the Bible, the Book of Job and the Book of Ecclesiastes. The writers of these two wisdom books are both dissenters from orthodox positions, and they both claim personal experience as their authority. They both take the mystery of existence seriously.

Job strikes out at the conventional wisdom of his day (and often of ours), the wisdom that insists if you are good, good things will happen to you. As woe after woe tumbles down on Job, as he loses everything, family, goods, health; as he sits in a pile of ash and scrapes the boils on his skin with broken shards of pottery, his friends explain patiently to him that all his suffering is fair. But Job stands his ground. He demands to know where God is and when Job will have his day in court. "I would speak to the Almighty," he declares. "I desire to reason with God" (Job 13:3, NRSV).

God accounts for himself not by logic or reason, but by simply enumerating the mysteries and wonders of creation, its vastness and its detail, its complexity and its beauty. God accounts for himself not by logic or reason, but by simply enumerating the mysteries and wonders of creation. "Everything you need to know is there in the vast mystery of my elegant world," he seems to say.

The sheer awesomeness of this vast mystery was brought home a few years ago by what someone dubbed, "the most important picture in the history of the world."

Try to take this in: The Hubble telescope, over the course of four hundred orbits around the earth, took eight hundred exposures of a core sample of the universe. The images were taken of a region of space where no stars could be seen. In other words, the Hubble was contemplating nothingness. But instead of a dark image, which many expected, the telescope found galaxy upon galaxy. Nearly 10,000 galaxies, each one a community of a hundred billion suns.

When my grandson and I were exploring the Natural History Museum in New York City, we came upon a statement designed to boggle the mind: "The universe has no center and no edge." And if that is not enough, physicists tell us that most fundamental processes of the universe occur outside space and time. We abide in a place utterly in-human in scale. If every person on earth got to name an equal share of the stars, we would each get to name more than a trillion. Ten thousand galaxies, each one a community of a hundred billion suns. I like to imagine that somewhere Galileo, who got in fierce trouble in his day for re-imagining our solar system, is smiling as he watches our struggle to re-imagine our universe yet again, to situate ourselves in a story grander than our imagination.

Job’s God is trying to tell us that God is beyond all of our categories, beyond all language. And Job finally gets it. He throws himself down before God and admits his presumption. "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (Job 42:3, NRSV).

Then, for good measure, God tells Job’s three friends, these representatives of conventional wisdom, that they have it all wrong as well. Whereas Job stays rooted in the integrity of his experience, the friends defend their worldview where everything makes sense; they force the facts into that worldview.

"Know then," insists one friend, "that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves" (Job 11:6). "Is not your wickedness great? There is no end to your iniquities," insists another of Job’s "miserable comforters" (Job 22:5).

But God cries foul. Speaking directly to one of the friends, God declares, "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7).

Both Job and the friends are powerless to understand the Mystery, but Job stays honest.
“And I’m standing here talking about God?” writes Richard Rohr, a Franciscan, author, and retreat master. I’m presuming to understand with this little head? It’s inconceivable. We’re one little planet in one galaxy in the midst of billions of galaxies, and we dare to presume to understand what’s going on. And then we get righteous about our theologies. I’m saved if I do this. I’m saved if I do that. If you don’t call God by the right name, he won’t like you. It’s hard to believe people can be that lost in their own little world and their own private importance. God does not allow Job to make that mistake.1

Like Job, Ecclesiastes is almost free of ideology. It’s more like a self-help book, advising its readers to focus on the day-to-day, the here and now. It has an almost Buddhist mindfulness quality to it. Accept the world and what it brings. Love what is. There is nothing to do but rejoice, do good, and be grateful.

The advice is so beautiful and comforting it feels good just to hear the words. Listen to what, in translation, is some of the most beautiful English prose ever written, framed as words from the Teacher. It comes from an oral culture. It was written to be spoken out loud.

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every matter under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted, A time to kill, and a time to heal; A time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; A time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to seek, and a time to lose; A time to keep, and a time to throw away; A time to tear, and a time to sew; A time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; A time for war, and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1–8)

Maybe the Teacher is trying to teach us that we ought simply to be glad we are alive. We ought to stay awake and pay attention. The Teacher tells us we live in a world of staggering complexity and beauty. The world is a mystery. But though we don’t know how the world works, we do know that it is and that it is splendid. Try to stay awake.

Ecclesiastes is not about pursuing rewards but about living in the present. Live right here, right now, in the complex, beautiful present. Wake up!

A. J. Jacobs learned that lesson from Ecclesiastes in a rather unique way. Jacobs grew up as a secular Jew, but in 2005, he decided to devote one entire year to living the Bible—literally living the Bible. He was set on finding the original intent of each biblical rule or teaching and following that to the letter, including the often neglected rules.3 He began by putting away his clothes made from mixed fibers.

On Day 91 of his project, he was sitting on the crosstown bus reading his favorite book of the Bible, Ecclesiastes. Not just reading it, but studying it intently. By now, he had a black bushy beard and therefore looked “more religious.”

“I’m concentrating hard,” he reports: Too hard. I feel a tap on my shoulder. I’m annoyed. I don’t like strangers touching me. I look up. It is a 50ish man. “Excuse me, this lady is feeling sick. Could you give her your seat?” He points to a tall brunette woman who was standing right in front of me. How did I miss this? The woman looks horrible. Her face is sallow, nearly the color of lima beans. She is doubled over. And she is weeping. I get up in a hurry with mumbled apologies.

Living in the present is a lesson from the Teacher of Ecclesiastes, but that is exactly...
Marcus Borg, my professor of New Testament in seminary, told us the following story. While he was professor of religion and culture at Oregon State University, students would frequently speak to him privately, admitting, "You know I really don't believe in God." Borg's invariable response was, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in." Generally the God they described was some variation on the wise old man in the sky. After they had finished explaining, Borg's usual response was, "I don't believe in that God, either." The students were somewhat shocked, because they knew he affirmed the reality of God.

He was, of course, suggesting that his students revisit their understanding of God, rather than simply jettison the whole idea. He was inviting them to become part of the Great Conversation, to feel no obligation to defend images of God that quake under scrutiny. Perhaps, he would suggest, they were not rejecting God but a caricature of God. As he frequently said, "It is hard to give your heart to something your head rejects."

In fact, the Bible itself does not paint a static or consistent picture of God. As one scholar recently pointed out, "The book of Exodus paints God as a violent, murderous, genocidal land thief." The god I don't believe in says "no" to girls to passing the sacrament, or blessing the sacrament, or becoming bishops, or stake presidents, or apostles, or prophets. The god I don't believe in is against same-sex marriage and iffy civil unions.

- The god I don't believe in says we are living in the last days so there is no need to take care of our planet.
- The god I don't believe in blesses wars.

Something else I was taught as a teenager fits right in. Joseph Smith said: "I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trammeled." Seek truth wherever it can be found. Relish the mystery. Relish the awesomeness. And remember, mysteries are not like problems. Problems call out to be solved, but mysteries are best enjoyed as mysteries.

Albert Einstein—the same Einstein who tells us that gravity bends space itself—seems to be echoing Job as he says: [The most beautiful and deepest experience a man can have is the sense of the mysterious. It is the underlying principle of religion as well as all serious endeavor in art and science. He who never had this experience seems to me, if not dead, then at least blind. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness. In this sense, I am religious. To me it suffices to wonder at these secrets and to attempt humbly to grasp with my mind a mere image of the lofty structure of all that there is.]

Two philosophers also champion respecting that which cannot be known. Aristotle's advice is "to seek no more precision on any subject matter than its nature allows." William James adds: "I am no lover of disorder and doubt as such. Rather do I fear..."
to lose truth by the pretension to possess it already wholly.8 Do we miss the point when we try to be clearer than clarity warrants? Is the promise of certitude a promise that cannot be kept?

Listen to the advice the poet Rilke has for us:

Be patient with all
That is unresolved in your heart.
Try to love the questions themselves
Like locked rooms and books
That are written in a very foreign tongue.
Do not seek the answers
That cannot be given
Because you would not be able to live them.
And the point is, to live everything
Live the questions now and perhaps without noticing it
You will live along some distant day
Into the answers.9

Perhaps the proper response to our awesome universe is simply gratitude. Gratitude that we have been bequeathed scriptures that are not monolithic, internally consistent treatises, but a compilation from many sources, by many writers who muse on their diverse encounters with the sacred. We have a Bible that is a library, not a handbook. Thus we can take the Bible seriously by embracing its contradictions.

In the end, Job and Ecclesiastes invite you and me to set aside our certainties and our false certainties. They call us to relish those sacred moments when we experience the sheer wonder of what is. Wake up, they urge, get off your butt, and listen to the hum of the stars.

NOTES

2. A. J. Jacobs, The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2007), 118.
3. Ibid., 119.
4. Ibid.

TORREY PINES BY NIGHT

These trees are old as the idea of Eden rooted on a bluff above the Pacific, sculpted in memory inseparable: the terrible beauty of their twisted limbs, this haunting sound heard nowhere else of wind passing over groves recalling what first brought you here, the one you spoke of love, then, distance the heart crossed from one dawn to the next. To go back is to invoke such ghosts. Gates protecting the pines still close at dusk, count on that, chains dragged across the road. On a moonless night, air heavy with sea, you still taste in this place a trace of wilderness, the long fall from grace, a sweetness you’d all but forgotten to crave.

—CHRISTIAN KNOELLER
When I'm with the whole family I can't seem to stop myself, even though I recognize what I'm doing when it's happening.

To me, this situation gets at the real purpose of forgiveness. Sunday School vague seems to be to talk about how the real purpose of forgiveness is for us, the forgivers: to become free of the burden of a grudge or ill-will. But I think this is only a happy by-product; it's secondary to the real point. As with most of Christ's teachings, our first and foremost concern should be the other, not the self. The most crucial reason for forgiveness is not so that we can continue our happy-go-lucky lives unfettered by the burden the other sinner imposed on us, but so that sinner can behave differently.

My own experience in something as simple as a family gathering is evidence that it's extremely difficult to behave differently than others expect. Despite moments of resolve, it's very hard not to believe the subtle and unspoken suggestions from others about who we are, what we are worth, and what we will become. Perhaps it's one of the reasons “bad” kids sometimes stay bad, criminals often stay criminals, abused children frequently grow up to abuse.

Jesus knows that if he wants his lost sheep back, it will have to be a group effort. He needs us to expect the best of each other, to honor the divinity in each other, to treat each other as though we've already moved on from the requisite 10,000; the hand which had made only 1,000 loaves of bread rather than the requisite 10,000; the hand which had chanced diapers for a mere two children instead of the whole host of Israel; the rational-izing hand which had spent more time typing than tole painting—yea, my weak and small hand rose high enough to catch the teacher's eye. It looked pathetic, even as a light on a hill looks pathetic when surrounded by suburban glow.

Then, like Moses with his speech impediment, my stupid mouth opened—only I had no Aaron to translate my words into the dialect of Tuna Casserole.

I told the sisters how grateful I was for Joseph Smith, how possibly his biggest sacrifice was to give up his identity. The real Joseph had issues (some that I was not about to bring up in Relief Society no matter how many Gnomes whacked me), and he wasn't we think it will be refused. Because people can change. And it's our job not only to let them, but to pave their way by treating them as though they already have. He needs us to forgive.

SKYE PIXTON ENGSTROM
Portland, Oregon

MYTHBUSTER

IT WASN'T THE silence of a pin drop, and it certainly wasn't the gentle silence of one good sister handing a tissue to another. But it was silence, I should have known that Joseph Campbell and Joseph Smith don't belong at the same Relief Society meeting.

Well, I did know it, but the Gnome of the Moral Imperative had nudged me that day. “Tell them about myth,” the Gnome prompted.

“I can't do that,” I hissed back. “Say the word ‘myth’ in this place, and you might as well be a yodeler in avalanche season.”

“They're getting it wrong.”

Wrong is relative. They need the myth. We all need a myth. Awareness of the myth would only threaten their construct of reality. It works because it's invisible.”

“Do you have a testimony or not?” the Gnome persisted.

Drat. I did have a testimony—a lumpy, misshapen, Mr.-Potatohead-without-cute-accessories testimony, but a testimony all the same. My problem was that it was about something these Relief Society sisters probably didn't even know existed. I could see it in their isn't-the-prophet-so-sweet-and-don't-we-love-him eyes.

“Noah, Lehi, and Abinadi did not fear to speak out,” the Gnome chided.

My hand—the weak hand which had made only 1,000 loaves of bread rather than the requisite 10,000; the hand which had chanced diapers for a mere two children instead of the whole host of Israel; the rationalizing hand which had spent more time typing than tole painting—yea, my weak and small hand rose high enough to catch the teacher's eye. It looked pathetic, even as a light on a hill looks pathetic when surrounded by suburban glow.

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perfect. The way I could sustain him as our first prophet was to separate the myth from the man and let him have his own life—warts and all—and not make him be the “Praise to the Man” only.

The silence, the shuffling of feet, the “yes, wells,” and then the recovery as we moved on to real testimonies. Nice save on the part of the teacher. Through the patience exercised by the sisters, and in spite of me, a good lesson was had by all.

Only later, as I sat in the foyer with a sulky Sunbeam on my lap, did someone come up to me. I didn’t even know her name. Like me, she was not part of the core ward. I was student, and she was military—in other words, we wouldn’t be there for the next four generations.

“I wanted to say thanks,” she said. “I had been feeling exactly what you said, but I didn’t know the right words. Can you tell me more?”

For half an hour we talked about myth, about stories, and how we all need the right sort of things to believe in, even if they didn’t actually happen that way. She said she felt better about continuing on in church; she had been wondering and worrying.

And that was it; we didn’t become best friends, I don’t think we even talked again. In fact, she moved soon afterward with the military.

I don’t know where the Spirit was that day, but I do know that there was a smug little Gnome poking me in the bewildered gut saying, “I told you so.”

NOELLE CARTER
Lyman, Wyoming

THE BIRD EGG INCIDENT

WORLD WAR II was being waged, and I could feel it in Franklin, Idaho, even as a six-year-old. When my brother Richard was commissioned and called to duty, he came home to tell us all goodbye before going to Dayton, Idaho, to catch the train for California. Richard had been away at college and wasn’t home very often, so I was eager to spend time with him.

He had lots of private things to tell Mother: things that had happened at the Sigma Chi house at Utah State Agricultural College in Logan, Utah, and things about boot camp. He told Mother the army had given him a supply of some stretchy rubber things which he had found a very good use for: when he knotted the ends together they made great garters to hold his pants in his boots.

I wanted to be in on all that good conversation, but every time I tried to get their attention, Mother told me to go play. I stood in the bedroom near the kitchen door and tried my best to hear what they said. I noticed Richard had his uniform laid out neatly on the bed. Everything was new and perfectly pressed. I went to the door a couple more times, but Mother motioned for me to go and play.

Feeling somewhat dejected, I walked out of the house and remembered a little egg in a bird’s nest up by the railroad tracks that my
big sister Diane and I had seen the day before. She had told me not to touch the egg. I walked up to the tracks and found the little nest. The egg was still there. I knew I shouldn’t pick it up, but I needed something to make me feel better. Besides, I fully intended to take the egg back when I was through playing with it.

I walked back to the house, went in the front door, and sneaked back to the bedroom. As I sat on the bed admiring the little spotted egg, it occurred to me that Richard’s necktie would make a very fine tunnel for the egg to travel through. So I gingerly worked the egg all the way down the tunnel and then started back. But when I got it about halfway, the egg broke.

I went into shock. Heart pounding, I hurried to the kitchen door to tell Mother what had happened. She told me for the last time to go play. That was it; I lost my nerve. I folded the necktie so the stain was on the underside, and scuttled guiltily out of the house.

Soon it was time to get ready for our trip to Dayton. Suddenly there was an explosion in the small bedroom. “Who in the hell ruined my necktie?” Richard bellowed.

I froze in my tracks and waited for an apocalypse to be unleashed. Miraculously, no one approached me or even hinted I might be the guilty one. Finally someone laughed, and then everyone laughed, and the tension was broken.

I remember riding solemnly to the train station and telling my big brother goodbye as he went off to war. Everyone cried on the way home, especially me: the secret, guilty, tie stainer.

For years, the conventional assumption was that little brother David had done this dastardly deed, and when the family scattered to far away places, all seemed to be forgotten.

But then we started meeting for reunions, and I began to notice, my face flushing, that someone always mentioned the bird egg and the necktie. In fact, the first time around, I heard someone say they thought that little Nan might have done it, and my heart leaped to my throat. They were on to me!

On other occasions, when the story was mentioned, a family member would laugh, whisper, or point at me. Then one day, I was the one called on to recite the story, and out it came, my confession. The story of my childhood crime. Finally, out in the open.

And with that, a family legend was born.

There are lots of ways I would prefer to be forgotten. For years, the conventional assumption was that little Nan might have done it, and my heart was ready for our trip to Dayton. Everyone cried on the way home, especially me: the secret, guilty, tie stainer.

Eventually agreeing—unbelieving themselves now

They look up to us and feel shame

Like failures, untried all the same

They listen at first, unbelieving

As failures, untried all the same

They listen at first, unbelieving

We shush him

Tell her that it will not work

That things are not that simple

They look up to us and feel shame

Like failures, untried all the same

Eventually agreeing—unbelieving themselves now

Where does the guilt lie

And will not anyone say

To the child’s hopeful idea today

I think you are on to something . . .

Nan during her innocent years before the “bird egg incident.”

FEW YEARS ago, my husband and I took two granddaughters to the property my parents owned in Spanish Fork Canyon. We hiked, picnicked, goofed off in the pond, and had a fine time.

I went into shock. Heart pounding, I hurried to the kitchen door to tell Mother what had happened. She told me not to touch the egg. I walked up to the tracks and found the little nest. The egg was still there. I knew I shouldn’t pick it up, but I needed something to make me feel better. Besides, I fully intended to take the egg back when I was through playing with it.

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There are lots of ways I would prefer to be forgotten. For years, the conventional assumption was that little Nan might have done it, and my heart was ready for our trip to Dayton. Everyone cried on the way home, especially me: the secret, guilty, tie stainer.

Only after we returned and gathered clothing to launder, did I notice pine gum on my favorite long-sleeved blouse. It was still sticky, and though I know how to pre-treat many stains—for instance blood and grease with lukewarm water and handsoap—I didn’t try this remedy. I didn’t want to make it worse by doing the wrong thing, so, pending taking it to the dry cleaners for advice, I hung it on the “to do” rack in a basement closet.

But I forgot it. Forgot for several years until cleaning out that closet. Seeing the gum still on the cuffs, I regretted that I hadn’t had it treated right away and wondered if it were too late. Absently, I picked at the marks. The dry resin fell right off. I stared. But before putting it in the washer, I did the lukewarm-water-and-hand-soap routine. The stain vanished.

So dealing with sins is that simple? Don’t even need to be lukewarm about repentance? Just hang your soul up in a back closet until you have more time and interest? Maybe even wait five years? Then dig your soul back out, pick at those little sins—and, wow, they fall right off!

Of course you’ve had to run around without a soul all that time. And by the time the sins fall off, you’ll have to wear a clean soul several years out of date. That maybe even smells of mothballs. It may sound easy, but, wait, “and should you die, before your laundry’s through . . . ?”

CAROL QUIST
Salt Lake City, Utah

I THINK YOU ARE ON TO SOMETHING

In this day of technology and clash
In this age of instant communications
Twenty-four hour news in a flash
In this day, we seldom accept

The child’s new idea
We shush him
Tell her that it will not work
That things are not that simple

They look up to us and feel shame
Like failures, untried all the same
They listen at first, unbelieving
Eventually agreeing—unbelieving themselves now

Where does the guilt lie
And will not anyone say
To the child’s hopeful idea today
I think you are on to something . . .
I am repenting today
I shall endeavor not to say
It can’t be done,
I wish not to be guilty
I pray God hears, and will say
You are on to something . . .

M. EMMETT TOWNSEND
Victoria, Texas

THE WONDERING JEW

As a NON-MORMON who travels widely in Mormon circles, I’m often a bit lost in a morass of culture and creed that, at times, passeth all understanding.

From time to time, I can feel God’s breath on my neck, pushing me one way or another, but finally giving up on me, an old stiff-necked Jew.

One day, I’m sure, God will say to me, “Assume the position!” At which point, I’ll spread my legs, place my palms flat against my own private Wailing Wall, and pray that God has at least as much sense of humor as I have.

I guess we all come to places in our lives where we have to come clean—confess our sins and promise, usually with little conviction, to do better next time. I seem to come to that place several times a day.

And each time I pledge to reform my life, I know that it’s a big lie—I’ll likely continue on as I have for the past fifty-eight years.

And maybe, in the end, that’s okay. If God himself is continually progressing, then the least he can do (being a fair God and all that) is to understand that I, and my fellow travelers, are desperately flawed but generally well motivated. We try to do good, but the good sometimes escapes us.

My Mormon friends assure me that a small army of well-wishers will gladly do temple work for me after I die. That’s good to know. The line is probably at least as long as those wanting to baptize me before I die. But

I’ve yet to find someone who will agree to let me back out of the water.

Spirituality is a strange thing, no? We find places in our lives where we look this way and that, and wonder whether we’ve developed spiritual cataracts or if the mess we’re seeing is, indeed, essential reality.

God, in his heaven, presides over a God-awful mess. And, to a degree, he’s responsible. Give humans free agency, let them make decisions based on flawed assumptions, and this old world is about as good as one can expect.

But, in his great wisdom, God recognizes that even the worst of us have some essential goodness that can be tapped by just waiting patiently for us to finally let his Spirit speak through us.

We all have the potential—Mormon or not. The real trick is getting religion out of the way and letting the Spirit shine through.

JEFFREY NEEDLE
Chula Vista, California

Do you want me to speak as your bishop, or tell you what I really think?...
When Saw I Thee An Awkward Pre-Teen?

I have a son named Peter who is magnificent. He is also complicated. The diagnoses are varied and not often terribly useful: bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, sensory integration dysfunction, non-verbal learning disorder. The alphabet soup of diagnostic acronyms mostly means that some things most of us do without thinking are hard for him, things like finding a shirt that he can bear to have touch him, or shoes that fit exactly right. Even little tasks, such as taking a shower, going to a movie, or packing a school lunch, require medicine and a lot of hard work. He is prickly and odd sometimes—the effort of living in his body leaves him little energy to spend on social niceties.

Peter is one of two Boy Scouts in our ward’s troop, and the other one doesn’t come very often. But the Scoutmaster is there every week, and not just there, but well-prepared, with a new skill to impart, a challenge, a treat.

Tonight he pulled into the church parking lot with a half-dozen 12-foot-long poles tethered to the top of his Civic. My boy came home a few hours later, his face shining with joy, to tell me about the suspension bridge (!) they were working on. It was the perfect activity for the boy who can make anything—ANYTHING—out of cardboard and duct tape, who loves to work hard and will cheerfully carry boxes for eight or ten hours when drafted by the Elders’ Quorum Moving Brigade. Clearly, this Scoutmaster knows my boy as well as he knows his knots, and lovingly untangles the essence of my child—and God’s—from the encumbrances of a quirky body.

I paraphrase:

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

For I was an hungered, and ye gave me an ice cream sandwich; I was bored, and ye took me camping; I was a little uncoordinated, and ye played a dozen games of PIG with me; I was sad, and ye taught me to tie knots; I was lonely, and ye knew that building a suspension bridge would be just the thing.

Blessed are the Scoutmasters.

KRISTINE HAGLUND
Boston, Massachusetts

The Unspeakable Vocabulary of Jesus’ Prayer

I have sometimes wondered why the record keeper of Third Nephi didn’t chronicle the words of Jesus’ prayer as he spoke—after all, he or she was there. Did his chisel break? Did the Golden Plates’ spellcheck go on the fritz? Did nature call? It had better be a good excuse because I would really have liked to read what Jesus actually prayed.

Obviously, I can’t reconstruct Jesus’ prayer. But I wonder what the next best thing might be. For example, what might Jesus pray about me if I could hear him?

Would his prayer be brutally honest? “Father, forgive him, he’s impatient behind old people at green lights when they don’t step on the gas right away. He’s selfish too, hiding treats in the kitchen so he doesn’t have to share.” I suppose if Jesus’ prayer with the Nephites were like this tattle-tale version, and I were scribe, I might commit a few journalistic omissions myself in order to save face.

Or would Jesus’ prayer for me be more like that of an advocate, where he would magnify every good act and excuse every bad? “Father, forgive him, he’s impatient behind old people at green lights when he wanted to prevent a rear-end collision; and he hid the treats in the kitchen so he doesn’t have to share.” I suppose if Jesus’ prayer with the Nephites were like this tattle-tale version, and I were scribe, I might commit a few journalistic omissions myself in order to save face.

Interestingly, there are at least two other tongue-tied scriptural references like Third Nephi. In D&C 121:26, the Lord refers to the “unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost”; and in the New Testament, Paul tells the Corinthians that he was caught...
up to Paradise and “heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter” (2 Corinthians 12:4).

The phrase “unspeakable words” points to a time deep in our spiritual history when words were imbued with such holiness that to even utter them aloud would profane them. Take, for instance, the Jews of antiquity, for whom the name of God in the Hebrew Bible was one such restricted word, usually referred to by scholars today as the tetragrammaton. Josephus, the first-century A.D. Jewish historian, recorded that Moses first learned the true name of God (Exodus 3:14-15) “so that he might invoke him by his name in his oblations . . . concerning which it is not lawful for me to say any more” (Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 2:12:4). The surviving Hebrew letters, YWHW, are only consonants because the reader was supposed to supply the vowels. Since anciently, there was no such thing as reading silently, the reader of the text would have to insert another word in place of the name of God.

This word in Hebrew was generally Adonai, or Lord; but sometimes Memra, or Word, was interpolated. In the temple prayer, called the Amidah, the high priest would actually say the true name of God on the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, but outside in the synagogue, a substitute would be used.

For the Jews, after the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem, the pronunciation of the real name of God was lost. Today in Jewish texts printed in English, references to Deity are sometimes spelled G_d to honor this tradition.

Even in the King James Version, the translators used LORD (spelled with small capitals) in the Old Testament in place of the tetragrammaton. Interestingly, the word Jehovah is actually a mistransliteration of the tetragrammaton interposed with the vowels from Adonai (which Christian students of Hebrew first did during the Middle Ages).

Despite losing the name of God, today’s Church may have recovered a “lost language of salvation.” In LDS temple ceremonies of the past, a phrase was uttered which was identified as part of the “pure Adamic language” (Moses 6:5–6), and the tradition of an unspeakable name uttered only in the temple continues today (Revelation 2:17, D&C 130:11).

Mircea Eliade proposed the term “hierophany” to describe an event or place where the sacred is made manifest. If we think of Jesus’ prayer for those gathered at Bountiful as a hierophanic event, it becomes interesting to note that each time the chronicler of Third Nephi mentions “hearing” the words, he precedes it with “seeing” Jesus pray. We usually think of prayers as something we hear while our eyes are closed, but the Nephite and Lamanite witnesses apparently watched Jesus pray.

What were they seeing? While only speculating, it is interesting to consider Jesus’ prayer as observable ceremony (as, for example, in the temple).

With all this in mind, I wonder: even if we had heard and written the marvelous phrases of Jesus’ prayer, might we still be unable to record what he was really communicating? Might we find ourselves falling back on the same reason as the writer of Third Nephi: “words cannot describe it”?

Perhaps this is what John the Evangelist had in mind when he wrote that Jesus was the most important part of the vocabulary of salvation: “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1).

MICHAEL VINSON
Star Valley, Wyoming

That Thy Vocabulary May Increase

PIKUACH NEFESH

THIRTY ONE AND A HALF YEARS AGO WHILE I WAS recovering from brain surgery, my neighbor gave me a copy of Chaim Potok’s The Promise, which I read that summer as my parents and I wended our way over Donner
Pass and down the coast of California.

The Promise is about a Bible scholar excommunicated for his work and the effect that excommunication, and other verbal violence toward him have on his family, particularly his son Michael. When Michael becomes psychologically disturbed, Danny, an Orthodox Jewish psychiatrist, breaks the ban of excommunication by treating Michael.

Reuven (from whose perspective the story is told) asks if Danny is breaking the ban because of *pikuach nefesh*, and Danny says yes. Reuven then explains to the readers that one must break a religious law if breaking it is necessary to save a life (*pikuach nefesh* meaning “to save a life”).

I remembered the term again when Jim Siebach from BYU’s philosophy department was giving a lecture at Utah Valley State College, where I was teaching. He said, “Life is the highest human value. Why? Because if you are not alive, you can’t practice any other human values.”

Six or seven years ago, I attended the monthly roundtable for Scout leaders. This particular time, we all met together for a panel discussion on preventing suicide. One speaker, an evangelical pastor from Provo, asked us to be aware that when you live in a culture with very high moral standards, violating those standards can cause a person to feel that he or she has done something irreparable. We need to be careful how we talk about high standards, he said, because the words we use can contribute to the feelings that drive someone toward suicide.

His point was not that LDS (or evangelical) standards are too high, but that we need to be careful about the language we use in presenting them. One of the major tasks we have in growing up—and then throughout our lives—is to understand the difference between rhetoric and speech we are to take literally.

It takes a certain spiritual and intellectual maturity to recognize when we should ignore rhetoric. Think of Pahoran’s reply to Moroni’s threat on his life for not sending reinforcements. Basically Pahoran says, “Moroni, I know you’re a hothead who didn’t stop to think that the capital might be under siege, but I love you and your great and noble heart anyway.” The maturity behind such a reply can take a lifetime to cultivate. And that’s what *pikuach nefesh* is about, life.

Several years ago I read an essay that haunts and moves me still. The author, a gay man, was talking to his bishop about the extreme difficulty of living without physical affection, and the bishop said, “If you have to go off and be gay somewhere, go off and be gay. But for heaven’s sake, don’t kill yourself.” The author said at that point, he realized that God didn’t hate him, the Church didn’t hate him, his bishop didn’t hate him. The feelings of hatred were coming from himself.

Somewhere this young man had internalized some very strong rhetoric that it was better to be dead than unchaste. Whether or not his bishop was thinking about strong rhetoric, or was just acting as a humane being, he saved a life.

HARLOW CLARK
Pleasant Grove, Utah

A Place for All Truth

THE CHIROPRACTY CONTROVERSY

This regular column features incidents from and glimpses into the life and ministry of Elder James E. Talmage as compiled by James P. Harris, who is currently working on a full-length biography of this fascinating Mormon apostle. The column title is adopted from the statement inscribed on the apostle’s tombstone: “Within the Gospel of Jesus Christ there is room and place for every truth thus far learned by man or yet to be made known.”

In his journal entry of Saturday, 6 September, 1930, Elder Talmage recorded the following:

It is with great difficulty that I am able to lift myself, even with the aid of a stick, which I have to use constantly as I move about, even though the step I take be 5 or 6 inches, and descending steps is even more difficult and dangerous as the muscles give way without warning. This of course greatly restrains my moving about, and although I have been under hospital treatment for more than two years and a half, I have been growing steadily worse. After very careful consideration of the matter, and in line with what doctors have told me, I am convinced that the trouble lies in the inactivity of the motor nerves which should energize the muscles of the legs. Yesterday I consulted a chiropractor, Dr. William W. Seare, who, by the way, is a counselor in the Bishopric of the 14th Ward and

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was formerly a member of my Prayer Circle. Today
the doctor began his treatment, stating that he found
a compressed condition of the nerves and he “ad-
justed” the spine accordingly. The orthodox medical
profession is opposed to the chiropractors and the os-
teopaths; but from my own observation both of the
classes have accomplished good. I hope to have some
worth while results to record later.

Two days later, Elder Talmage reported that he sat with, “a
committee considering the proposed Mutual Improvement
Health and Hygiene.” Talmage then reports that,
“A strong but respectful protest has been presented to
the First Presidency and the General Superintendency
of the Y.M.M.I.A. by a number of chiropractors

against certain disparaging sen-
tences appearing in the Manual,
which seem to cast ridicule upon
chiropractors and osteopaths. We
have to remember that both of these
professions are licensed by law in
the State of Utah.”

Further meetings on the manual were held
on 11 and 12 September.

Another voice of confidence for chiro-
practors came from a fellow member of the
Quorum of the Twelve, who had also sus-
tained a medical injury. On 25 September,
1930, Talmage wrote the following account
of Elder Stephen L. Richards:

“Brother Stephen L. Richards was
present with us today after an ab-
sence of several weeks, caused by a
very serious affliction. The treat-
ment of an affected tooth brought
on a state of paralysis of the left side
of the face, the condition develop-
ing within one hour after the
dentist had drilled into the tooth.
He is unable to open or close the
left eyelid and consequently the eye
on that side has had to be sealed up.
His face is very badly drawn.”

The next day, 26 September, at Talmage’s
encouragement, Elder Richards submitted to
chiropractic treatment from Dr. Seare.
Talmage adds, “The doctors who have had
his case in hand have given no encour-
agement of an early recovery, and his case ap-
ppears to be one upon which chiropractic
methods should have good effect if upon
any. He and I receive treatments in my of-

ci-e.” Please note that his office was in the
Church Office Building.

Unfortunately, just a few days later,
Friday, 3 October, 1930, the first day of the
Church’s Conference, Talmage took a severe fall going between
the Tabernacle and the Church Office Building between meet-
ings. “It gave me a very severe shaking up,” he wrote.

On 4 October, he wrote, “Brother Stephen L. Richards and I
received treatment from Dr. Seare last evening and again early
this morning, in my office. I can clearly differentiate the little
improvement I have shown in my ability to walk on the level,
although I have been in considerable pain and have increased
difficulty in stepping upward or downward. I had to be taken
to the Tabernacle and brought back by auto both forenoon and
afternoon, and again in the evening.”

Elder Talmage does not record the final outcome regarding
the anti-chiropractic passages in the Y.M.M.I.A Manual, but it
is safe to assume that the pro-chiropractic sentiment prevailed.
PROPOSED 2009 SUNSTONE SYMPOSIUM PROGRAM

By Kynthia Taylor
(Originally posted on ZEOPHEHADSDAUGHTERS.COM)

112. Paper A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO PEEPSTONES AND DIVINING RODS
Abstract Tired of useless academic arcana on the application of magical accoutrements in Joseph Smith's era? Come to this interactive session, watch live demonstrations of divination and levitation, and find out how to make your peepstone work for you!

113. Paper ARMPIT HAIR AND THE GENDERED DYNAMICS OF THE BYU HONOR CODE
Abstract Recognizing that armpit hair is a secondary sex characteristic not dissimilar to facial hair, our panel explores the following pressing issue: should female BYU students be required to apply for armpit-hair cards before being allowed to cultivate a (well-groomed) thicket of hair in the underarm region? What about males?

114. Paper CELESTIAL NUDISM: FACT OR FANCY?
Abstract Do heavenly denizens, who after all no longer have anything to hide in their state of Edenic bliss, waste time with fine-twined linens and those pesky social inequalities they reinforce? Or are the suit and tie truly an everlasting signifier of all that is good and holy?

115. Paper MOTHERS WHO KNOW USE MOTHER'S LITTLE HELPER
Abstract Mothers who know wear pantihose while scrubbing the toilet. Mothers who know crochet their children's diapers with thread carded from cotton they grew themselves. Mothers who know know the importance of relying on a Source outside themselves for emotional strength and stability.

116. Paper THE STAGES OF CRISIS OF FAITH
Abstract Never experienced that proverbial crisis in your belief system? Our experts in doubt and religious sabotage guarantee you'll leave this session in crisis or your money back! (Watch next year for our follow-up workshop: Six Weeks to Religious Apostasy.)

117. Paper WHO PRESIDES IN A LESBIAN RELATIONSHIP?
Abstract Forget the supposed threat to traditional marriage that same-sex unions are said to entail. Let's explore the more vexing doctrinal issue gay partnerships present: Can two gay men mutually preside over each other as equal partners? And should lesbian lovers continually defer authority in a spirit of mutual nurturance?

118. Paper 006: LICENSE TO OFFEND
Abstract Do your home or visiting teachees take umbrage at your strident and imperious efforts to dragoon them into heaven, or at your well-meaning explications of their personal sins? Do your associates resist your overbearing endeavors to educate them about the Church's shocking past, or your constant attempts to rescue them from Mormonism? We'll provide tips on how to stand your ground and remind others that when they choose to take offense, they are at fault.

Abstract If you think you understand this title, you're delusional. Academic pundits of the most solemn caliber will mince linguistic gobbledygook in this cook-off of pretension.
Sometimes I pray with my eyes wide open.

And sometimes with one of those eyes on the television, just for good measure. Not because I'm particularly absorbed in that Downy commercial but because I don't want God to think he has my full attention. Childish, I know.

When I was a child, I prayed as a child, with my eyes screwed tightly shut, arms folded firmly against my body, speaking in slow, taut tones, as if I could command divine attention through a sheer critical mass of rigidity. I carefully balanced the ratio of blessings asked to blessings thanked for. I spoke of moisture instead of rain. I used all of my thee's and thou's correctly, and, approximating the sonorous tones of my elders, asked to be both nourished and strengthened.

At least, that's how I prayed in front of people. It was, of course, all just for show—something I'd picked up in church. Something to trot out at mealtimes and in Sunday School. Because that's what reverence looked like in sacrament meeting and sounded like in Primary, and I suppose I thought that's what reverence must feel like—at least, to other people. But to me, outside of church and in my own world, reverence was something completely different.

In those days, I was the embodiment of having a prayer in one's heart. Though loquacious on the surface, I was not much given to giving up my true thoughts. But the song of the righteous flowed freely through my limbs and through my mind and sometimes flew right out of my mouth when no one was around to hear it. I walked around in constant conversation with myself and with my Creator. We had long, rambling talks that had neither beginning nor end. Each new day took up where the previous had left off, often in the middle of the thought that had drifted away with me into sleep. In those days, reverence felt like whispering secrets to your sister in the dark. It felt like walking barefoot, hand in hand, over cool, shaded grass. In those days, reverence felt like friendship. And freedom. It felt like safety. And love. And not much at all like "reverence."

In those days, prayer was not an "ask and ye shall receive" sort of thing. It wasn't a method for getting what I needed, or even really for showing gratitude or respect. Not to me. Prayer, in those days, was simply a way of connecting. To what, I doubt I ever paused to articulate, any more than I ever really paused to articulate any of those heavenly exchanges—I only know that it worked. I felt connected, and the connection was comfortable, so easy. In those days, I could slip into slumber knowing I was loved and watched over, that I was important, and that everything would be all right in the end. I never asked for much, not in those days. Perhaps I did not ask then because I did not then need.

Until one day when I was about eight years old, playing on my first soccer team, and my jersey went missing just before game-time. Mom was jingling the car keys at me in frustration as I frantically searched my floor, my closet, my drawers, but came up empty. As I rifled through my belongings, I tossed a hasty, heartfelt prayer heavenward: Heavenly Father, please please please help me find my jersey, Mom's gonna kill me.

And then, my first Impression. Just like everyone talks about in testimony meeting. Against all logical inclination, I searched my pajama drawer (which, just like everyone talks about in testimony meeting, I had already thoroughly—or so I thought—searched). There, at the bottom, beneath a night-shirt I despised so much I never wore it, lay my jersey. And there, just like everyone talks about in testimony meeting, sprouted a little testimony.

From that time forward, I became obsessed with the doctrinal ins and outs of prayer. With a waxy, day-glo orange highlighter, I marked every scriptural passage I could find that referred to asking and receiving, knocking and being opened unto. I began to wonder what faith that moves mountains might feel like and if that faith dwelt inside me. But I also discovered that it was imperative not to "ask amiss," and I puzzled over what that might mean. In the years that followed the Day I Lost and Found My Jersey, I became a miniature expert on prayer and felt that I harbored some of the mysteries of God safely in my heart, along with that comfy old reverence and encapsulated by that easy, foundational friendship.

EMILY SUMMERHAYS lives in New York City where she puts her literary education to use as the official grants writer for the American Museum of Natural History. She is a blogger at Feminist Mormon Housewives.
BUT AS CERTAINLY as my house was built upon the Rock, the rains did come down, and the floods did come up.

Mom had always been my hero, of course, in the way that all mothers are heroes to their children. She had golden hair and golden ideals and golden achievements. She ran marathons and kept a spotless house. She made family dinners and had a scientific career. She raised four children: honor students, all-state athletes, missionaries, “nice kids” (made even more amazing by the fact that I was in my early teens). She baked brownies. She saved lives. She made countless school projects out of salt-dough and Popsicle sticks. Everyone on our street envied her perfect flowerbeds. She had faith in herself and in hard work and Providence, and she was always there to lean on.

And then, she wasn’t.

But it began slowly. At first, there was an occasional hitch in her step. Later, a frequent furrow in her brow. Soon, she was walking around with a hand jammed into her side, as though trying to hold the pain to one spot. My prayers began to grow worried.

As the disease worsened, my faith became more necessary and, therefore, more fervent. I was determined to ask in faith, nothing wavering, for the answers I needed. And what I needed was to know how to help her. I wasn’t asking for big-time miracles. I wasn’t expecting a healing. The bulk of my faith was fixed on the doctors. The ones who would fix her. There was no need to pull out the big guns. I sought instead to find ways to ease her pain. I gave her a journal to help her occupy her mind while she was physically incapacitated. She never wrote in it. To make sure she stayed out of the sun, I took over much of the gardening. But her love of mucking about in the dirt was so strong it made her foolish, and many were the days that I found her, near-fainted, in the yard, with muddy knees. Every night I prayed, with increasing urgency, as something inside me began to tremble.

I was about eighteen the night my mother and I went into the kitchen for a glass of milk. She collapsed in front of me—just went down on the linoleum, neither folding nor crumbling gracefully like they do in the movies. I don’t remember hearing her hit the floor, just the sound of spilled milk dripping steadily from the countertop. I dropped to my knees and screamed for my father.

Later that night, I dropped to my knees again and screamed silently for my Father in Heaven. That’s it, I explained to him. This is all we can take. This is rock bottom. You have to help us, please. Please. I don’t know what to do. Make her better. Make me better. Make something better.

But it wasn’t rock bottom—not by a long shot—it only got worse. My mother could hardly bear the weight of her own shrinking frame. Disease had left her body weak, her skin paper-thin and dark with bruising. The holes in her thoughts and sentences grew as the medication slowly leached her memory away. She could not stand at a counter long enough to cook. She could not sit long enough to go to the movies. She could not run, she could not work, she could not drive, and perhaps worst of all, she could not go out in the sun.

Every morning I left the house in fear, and every evening I returned directly to my mother’s bedroom, just to make sure she was all right.

All was never right, but there were often golden moments. I
spent hours on her bed, reading her my school papers, telling her about the things I did with my friends, making plans with her for the garden. Some days I would come home to find her in a nightgown the color of Crayola sunshine, dancing to Bon Jovi. Some days she’d ask me to take her out for a chocolate-chocolate donut. Those moments were precious gifts. But I wanted more than just a few minutes of happiness.

In classic type-A fashion, I determined that all of this was some sort of divine test and that I was failing it. I reevaluated the way I prayed and decided I must be doing something wrong. I revisited all those scriptures I’d discovered in my early fervor, and decided that I was somehow “asking amiss”:

Yea, I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh. Yea, my God will give me, if I ask not amiss. (2 Nephi 4:35)

Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts. (James 4:3)

I knew I wasn’t asking to satisfy any lusts for personal gain. I didn’t think I was asking anything for myself, really. So maybe it was my attitude. Something fundamentally wrong with my approach. Perhaps my hitherto informal prayer habits weren’t, after all, what an omnipotent God wanted from me. So I resurrected rigid “reverence” and humble formality. I tried to pray as formulaically and worshipfully and as kneeling-by-the-bed-ly as possible, just like the pictures in the Ensign, as if those prayers could be somehow more potent. Any port in a storm.

To avoid being too much of a drain on the divine storehouse of blessings, I saved up my requests for the very most important things and never asked anything for myself. Not for help on my finals, not for comfort in other trials (and there were many other hardships, physical and financial, with which my family, like all others, had to contend). I directed all my faith toward this one problem, determined somehow to solve it. Nevertheless, my prayers fell crumpled into my lap, one by one, time after time. Each request returned to sender.

Having at length concluded that my faith wasn’t apparently good enough to move mountains, I reasoned that it must be that I had (or maybe my mother had) something else to learn. I squared my shoulders. If life was to be a test, I was going to “pass.” As the years went by, I offered up to the Lord all the things I had learned about life and love and family and faith and compassion and hope and dignity and sorrow and patience and suffering and on and on and on, as if at last, the “right” answer would click open the lock that had kept my mom in pain, and finally set my family free.

I was tired, spirit-sore, weary, and wary, and at the bottom of it all, I had a hard time believing in the weight of my prayers. Deep down, I thought the fault was mine. I felt like a pathetic annoyance, as though my heartfelt, faith-drenched pleas sounded like so many “are we there, yets?” to my Father in Heaven. I began to feel as if God’s reception of my prayers must be something along the lines of, “What, you again? This again?”

Never one to want to put others out, I stopped asking. For anything.

Who can sway the mind of God? Not me, apparently.

I had no real belief in the efforts of others, either. In fact, when others offered to pray for my mother, I would smile and nod and wish they’d just pick up the phone and call her instead. It would have taken about as much time, yet meant so much more to her. Especially since I had, by then, finished school and left home. Had, in fact, escaped, after a fashion, into the relative freedom of my own emerging life. Leaving her that much more lonely in her bed, in her garden, and in her pain. My escape was imperfect, however, burdened as I still was with daily reminders of my spiritual impotence and with an overwhelming sense of responsibility. It was my faith, after all, that had failed.

The day the prayers finally ran dry was one that, ironically, had nothing much to do with my mother. I was twenty-five years old, staring into a computer screen, watching in real time as my baby brother’s last hopes finally came crashing to earth. As I watched in queasy silence, I could almost hear milk dripping steadily onto the kitchen floor.
He and I had spent our earliest years at each other’s throats, our teen years as bosom buddies, and all of those years, both good and bad, playing catch in the backyard. The rhythmic sound of a baseball slapping into leather very often took on an angry cast, but mostly it was like the ticking of some great cosmic clock, measuring out our growing strength and strengthening bond. At first, I barely put up with his ineptitude. He was too young, too little, and far too annoying. We usually did more fighting than throwing, more hitting than catching. But necessity bound us together, and eventually love for the game taught us love for each other. When the house became too silent, we’d grab our mitts and head outside. When Mom’s struggle became oppressive, we’d find a ball and hit the grass. When we couldn’t talk, we’d throw. We became each other’s haven. The oasis in the desert. The calm in the eye of the storm.

It soon became apparent, not just to me but to everyone who saw him move, that my brother was a Natural. Chock-full of God-given talent. But riddled with physical limitations. When he had his first knee surgeries, at age thirteen, I brought him jelly beans and helped him oil his new glove. In later years, I stood in the place of my mother, who all too often couldn’t stand: I drove him to physical therapy, picked him up from practice, and watched his orthopedic surgeon drain syringe after syringe full of bloody fluid from his legs. In spite of it all, though, joy radiated from him when he took the field. Troubles at home melted into the background when I watched him go up to bat, and seeing him run the bases was testimony enough of miracles.

In time, his life became like a story from the Children’s Friend. He was scouted by the majors. He was offered big-time scholarships. He was flown around the country to investigate his prospects. And yet, he was humble. A gentle giant. No one was more kind, more generous. No one was more dedicated, more single-minded. No one worked as hard or sacrificed so much. And then he sacrificed it all. He laid all that—his past and his future, the only thing he’d ever wanted or truly loved—on the altar of faith. He told them all, “No,” and went on a mission.

Like Abraham, he was ultimately spared the usual outcome of that particular sacrifice. Stanford University held a place for him and welcomed him to the team, two years older, two years wearier, and two years out of shape. But he blew out his knee in the second week. More surgeries, more miseries; more prayers, more pain.

I could see it all unfolding. I fought fate on two fronts now. When he made a miraculous recovery after an entire year of intensive physical therapy and was drafted by the Mariners, I began to think that, though God had closed the door on my mom, perhaps he’d opened up wide the windows of heaven to pour out my brother’s blessings. It would almost have been worth it.

But again, he sacrificed. He did the sensible thing, turned down the major leagues, and finished his degree. He was stronger than he’d been in years, faster and surer on his legs, hitting
FEW MONTHS ago, a friend told me she had been praying for me. As has become my habit, I smiled and nodded and had no idea what to say. “Thank you” seemed inadequate even while protestations that I didn’t really believe in prayer bubbled up under the gratitude.

I knew why she’d been praying. I’ve been sick. As with my mother, it had begun slowly, with unexplainable aches and pains. I walked a bit too slowly, too stiffly, too carefully. The smudges under my eyes grew more pronounced. My doctors told me what they told my mother all those years ago, and whenever I think of her now, I can see the spectre of my possible future. I think of spilt milk and muddy knees. I think of nightgowns in the afternoon and pills, morning, noon, and night. I think of my brother and me slipping out the back door to try to play like normal kids. I think of our trying to escape the dual prisons of our silent house and our mother’s frail body. But there’s no escaping it now. For any of us.

I knew why my friend had been praying: because she loved me and because she was scared. In its purest form, prayer is simply an act of love; the first and last bastion of the impotent, the worried, the scared. And while I couldn’t quite share it, I also couldn’t deride her faith. I couldn’t even shrug it off with the usual vacant smile and distracted nod. Instead, I loved her back. In that moment, as she gazed at me with unfeigned compassion in her eyes and declared her faith with a complete lack of self-consciousness, I saw myself as I once had been—as I’m not sure I can ever be again—and those spiritual fists I’d clenched up so very tightly began to ease. The anger and hurt and fear began to drain away, replaced by the faintest glow of gratitude, and from the ruins of my childhood prayers, something new began to emerge: not quite faith, but a tiny hope; not quite a prayer, but the rarest wish for one.

Over subsequent months, that first wish grew and multiplied. My husband had a crucial presentation to make. A ward member got a frightening diagnosis. A neighbor family struggled financially. Through it all, I wished that I could pray. A friend watched her father slowly die. Another lost a brother to an accident. Still another endured a dangerous pregnancy. I wished with all my heart that I could give them the words, I’ll pray for you. I wished to the point of tears that I could do it, but I couldn’t, quite. Not then. Not yet. I just . . . couldn’t.

But still, that wish was there. Someday I might again be able to pray for something that really matters; but for now, I practice over pancakes and lasagna. Mealtime and sacrament meeting, Sunday School and bedtime.

Sometimes, now, I pray—with my eyes wide open. And sometimes, yes, one of those eyes is trained on the television. I guess you could say that I’m spiritually skittish. But sometimes, now, out of the corner of my eye, I can almost see myself clearly again. I can almost see that girl who talks to God, liberally, and upbraideth not.

THE MIRACLE OF CHICHAROS & LENTEJAS

My grandmother always said a prayer to the legumes, or the God of, because she said they were both high in protein, and we could go without meat. We did in Cuba, go without bread, without meat, and all we ate for days on end were chicharros and lentejas. They never tasted right to me as a child.

I often ran outside and spat a mouthful into the chicken coop, watched the chickens come to it, eye it, then peck at the mess once or twice—

At night I prayed to the Saints in charge of these peas to please stop bringing so much of it into our lives.

—VIRGIL SUÁREZ

CHICHAROS & LENTEJAS

My grandmother always said a prayer to the legumes, or the God of, because she said they were both high in protein,
I have taken a long and tumultuous path in uncovering the depth and richness of the Mormon tradition. It is a journey I cherish. I share in the hope of lighting the way for others who are groping along in their own particular paths.

After attending an Episcopal church in Salt Lake City until about age twelve, I returned home one day after witnessing a particularly virulent anti-Mormon outburst in a Sunday school class and told my parents that I didn’t want to go to church anymore. My parents, who were secular in orientation, didn’t seem to care much about my reasons: they simply said that would be okay. Regarding religion, their common denominator was that the Mormon Church was not a good institution.

My mother’s father, from Norway, had moved to Salt Lake City with his French-Canadian wife and had promptly been swindled by some Mormon businessmen. My father’s mother, the daughter and sister of Church presidents, had been taken advantage of in a business transaction by a general authority she had trusted. Her brother, Joseph Fielding Smith, had said, “Sorry, can’t do anything about it,” leaving her as a now considerably impoverished widow to raise her five kids on her own, too awed and obedient to sue a general authority. When an orphaned teenager, my father’s grandmother had been forced by her uncle, Parley P. Pratt, in whose home she had taken shelter as an orphan, into an abusive—even tragic—polygamous marriage. But despite all this, my father was about the only one in his family who had walked away from Mormonism, although he did reconnect with the Church shortly before his death.

Some years later, when I learned of this history of Church-related abuse in my family, I wondered why anyone would want to be involved in such an abusive organization with so many dishonest people and weird beliefs. I wondered why my mother’s family would stay in Salt Lake City when they viewed the Mormons so negatively, and why most of my father’s family would stay connected to the Church when family members had experienced such multi-generational abuse.

Most of my friends growing up in Salt Lake City were Mormons, which naturally led me to wonder from time to time if I might eventually join the Church, but by high school, I had become an agnostic, somewhat obsessed by my sense (which no one else I knew seemed to be aware of) that our perception of the world is largely a function of our cultural contexts and unconscious drives. By junior high, I had convinced the advanced placement science teacher to teach me the scientific foundations of these perspectives, and, among other things, I went to the state science fair finals with a project on optical illusions and became a hypnotist at parties—both for the fun of it and to explore the hidden dynamics of the mind.

In the mid-1960s, I attended Stanford University as a freshman. I was then one of the best high school swimmers in the country, and my plan was to become a research scientist while also swimming on a national and perhaps international level. Instead, when I encountered the first intimations of the cultural revolution, I decided that I wanted to become an agent for societal change. And even though I was progressing well in my sport, the idea of swimming back and forth in a pool of water trying to go faster than someone else became so absurd that I decided to walk away from a team that took the national championship the next year. My parents were completely stunned when I arrived home that summer and told them that I was abandoning Stanford, couldn’t care less about swimming, and wanted to be a social activist.

Before this decision to be an activist, I had hardly even joined a committee or spoken to a group, so I felt I needed to get my start in a small pond to learn communication and leadership skills. So I decided to enroll at the University of Utah. After a quick inquiry, I found out that even though I would...
have to sit out a year due to transfer requirements of intercollegiate athletics, the U was willing to give me a full-ride swimming scholarship from the day I walked in the door. So, even though my passion for swimming had disappeared, I decided to swim to cover college costs. Three years later, I was student body president at the university and involved nationally in a number of social change endeavors. But more important to me then was that, by the time I graduated, I had faced up to the fact that I was no longer an agnostic but a full-blown atheist.

Upon graduation, I elected to take a fellowship to do graduate study in political philosophy for a year at the University of Hamburg. Perhaps more than anything else about that opportunity, I was attracted to the totally independent and unstructured nature of the program. Not only could I design my own course of study, but I would have a great deal of time to penetrate deeper into my own beliefs and sensibilities. I intuited that the deeper I went into myself, the more I would be able to sense some deeper reality. Since I had no belief in a God “out there,” I wanted to know what was “in here.” Facing up to my atheism and deciding to keep pursuing greater understanding of my own consciousness formed my first explicit commitment to a quest for spiritual authenticity.

Even though I drank some beer with my new German student acquaintances, I spent almost all of my free time alone in my empty room for nine months with one goal in mind: to question everything that I knew and had ever known, to see if there were something underneath it all, some deeper reality. I spent endless hours, it seemed, deliberately casting aside every unexamined assumption and even observing and exploring the filters of my own mind.

Before long, I was in the middle of a process that I don’t think I could have stopped if I had wanted to. It was like falling into a dark hole where every marker of a known reality had disappeared. I stopped eating much; my hair began falling out. Physically, I became a shadow of my former self. For a day or two some months into the process, I don’t think it would be wrong to say that I had gone mad. Then one day, in some inexplicable way, I hit bottom. I had cleared everything away, all my preconceptions and filters. I had cleared away thought and logic. And I found that something was there. The best way I can describe it is as a physical resonance, as if I were connected to a sort of tuning fork that allowed me to feel or listen deeply to a situation. It was a sensibility that one might call intuition—or, in other words, an awe-inspiring sensory connection with everything.

From that moment on, meditation became more valuable to me. Because meditative practices focus on the interior arena where I find the most complete connection with everything external, I was sometimes able to achieve an experience of complete unity. I began to realize that this interior quest was actually a spiritual quest, but still one that involved no sense of deity.

A FEW YEARS later, I ended up attending Columbia Law School. By then, I had decided that I needed to take another move into deeper awareness and spiritual authenticity. I had begun to sense that even though the experience of intuition I had reached in Germany, and the meditative mysticism I was practicing as a result, had provided a source of
guidance, comfort, and, frankly, power, I could feel my psyche destabilizing, opening to something even deeper. I could tell that I needed to descend farther, and I sensed that I would be moving into another intense period of searching and deepening.

I moved into an apartment in Harlem far from where I would likely run into other law students. With my spare time, I meditated and pored over philosophical and religious texts. But mostly I meditated—never thinking about the possibility that a sense of God would ever be a part of my spiritual search. As the framework of my consciousness began to unhinge, I pretty much lost my ability to sleep at night. I would drink Gallo wine to knock myself out late at night and coffee during the day to stay awake. I felt that I was walking around in a dream. I would retreat to my apartment to engage in what seemed like a life-and-death struggle to settle into some deeper reality, for the reality that I was familiar with was dissolving.

While I lived in New York, some Latter-day Saint friends of mine urged me to look into Mormonism. I scoffed initially, but because the heritage of my family was so deeply intertwined with the history of the Church, I decided I might learn something, even if it was just a cultural refinement lesson. It seemed absurd, though, to pray to a God I couldn’t conceive of about things I didn’t believe.

After nearly a year of tentative inquiry in the midst of ongoing meditation, prayer, and searching, I felt I had to reach a conclusion about Mormonism. Intellectually I thought that there was no way I was going to join this church, but I was undeniably moved by the spiritual resonances I was feeling. So I began meditating, contemplating, and praying in earnest until a week came and went when I was doing little else. Then one night, while deeply engaged in prayer, I felt smothered in an all-embracing darkness. I felt as though I was going to be destroyed. In the midst of this darkness, my soul cried out for the God I had doubted. Almost immediately, I was engulfed in a sea of light. I could suddenly see the Book of Mormon not in a literalness of many aspects of the faith. I had gotten to the point of looking beyond concepts to trusting in deeper resonances, and on that deeper level, all systems were go. So I dropped the letter to my uncle Joseph in the mail and was baptized the next time I was in Salt Lake City.

A few weeks after my baptism, I visited the prophet at his home. Even though we had never met, he welcomed me warmly. He was extremely frail. He listened to my doubts about the literalness of the Church’s truth claims. Although weak, he was lucid. He smiled and gently told me the following: Who I am is more important than what I precisely believe, and what I manifest based on who I am demonstrates my actual belief. He counseled me that if I exercised faith and aligned myself with the Spirit, the truths I needed to know would manifest themselves in the way I needed to know them, that they would settle in me and bring me peace and joy. He encouraged me to be godly in all that I did, to walk humbly before God, to love wisely by and through the Spirit, and to do my best to bless the lives of others.

Perhaps because I had been such an unusual prodigal son with a dramatic conversion experience (not to mention that my uncle was a prophet) I soon experienced something like being “on a roll” in the Church. In a room of the Temple Square Visitors’ Center, one could hear my recorded voice recounting the revelatory experiences that had led me to join the Church. Just a few years after my baptism, I was called to be a bishop of a student ward at the University of Utah. I was regularly called out of the audience at stake conferences to bear my testimony or spontaneously comment on some gospel topic. Having been an atheist only a few years before, the whole situation seemed very surreal to me.

OUT OF THE blue a few years later, when I was still in my thirties, came an offer to become the Church’s regional general counsel for Great Britain, Eastern and Western Europe, and Africa. So my wife, Colleen, and I and our two young children moved to Frankfurt, Germany. I agreed to a three-year contract and hoped that it might lead to
a career with the Church that would enable me to help make a favorable global impact for an organization to which I had decided to dedicate my life.

During my time abroad, I was very impressed by Joseph Wirthlin, the area president. Much like the way I felt in the presence of Neal Maxwell, the one other general authority I had gotten to know well (beginning when he’d been my professor at the University of Utah), when I was with President Wirthlin, no one was there but me. By that I mean that despite his having a distinct and powerful personality, he had no ego, no personal agenda. He didn’t dwell on the past or the future, only what would be the wise and compassionate thing to do in the moment. He didn’t seem to have what I would call quickness of mind, but his judgment and decisions were amazingly wise, even prescient. He was a person deeply aligned with the Spirit. For me, he was proof that committed, life-long spiritual practice does transform one into a being of a higher nature, with deeper awareness and broader and wiser capacities for caring.

About a year into the job, I became increasingly aware that, even after being in most Western European countries for decades, the Church had not complied with many rules and regulations, and some of its representatives were even behaving illegally at times. I learned that the Church’s chief auditor was thinking about developing a legal and risk-compliance audit. I contacted him and suggested that one of the Western European countries be one of the study’s pilot areas. He agreed, and Portugal was selected. I helped design the audit instrument, feeling that this tool could really help the Church turn a corner and move into becoming a mature and legally responsible organization in all its affairs.

The Church’s general counsel flew to Frankfurt, and together we traveled to Portugal to review the audit results. We found undeniable and widespread illegality in the way the Church and its representatives were functioning. Generally speaking, though, it was a matter of people not bothering to follow the rules, rather than actually trying to do something dishonest.

A month went by, and nothing apparent happened to start bringing the Church into alignment, so I called the Church auditor to see what was going on. He said the general counsel had shut down the auditing program. The auditor had appealed to the top of the Church hierarchy but had lost the battle. I appealed through my own channels to the general counsel’s office and was told to abandon this course of action and to allow everything to go on as before, even in Portugal. I appealed to President Wirthlin. He commiserated but said that some things take time. He expressed his appreciation for my trying to get the ball rolling and said he was sure that, in the long run, things would begin to move in the direction I was urging.

Even though Elder Wirthlin was the ecclesiastical and administrative head of this area, I reported professionally to the general counsel’s office in Salt Lake City. I didn’t feel that I could in good faith preside over systemic illegality that I could not at least attempt to correct. This was a huge moment for me because both Elder Maxwell and President Wirthlin were encouraging me to stay with the Church professionally for the long haul. Nevertheless, after much agonizing, I asked the general counsel’s office to find a replacement and went back to Salt Lake City nearly a year before the expiration of my contract. The Church hierarchy viewed this as a desertion of my post. I was brokenhearted but felt that to do anything different would destroy my integrity. As the years went by, I did hear that the problems I had been concerned about did get addressed adequately.

NO ONE SAW me smile much for the next few years. I was literally in mourning. I was now personally living the paradox of my family heritage, agonized because of the Church and yet staying connected to it. I told no one who wasn’t intimately involved in my decision why I came home. My trust in human nature—even the human natures of those high in the Church—had taken a blow, and I never wanted to work for the Church again. Nevertheless, my spiritual practice in the Church was not shaken. It was within that institution that I had learned to live by and through the Spirit. It made my life—and for the most part, the lives of those around me—better, happier, and more productive. I was pleased to be called as a Scoutmaster and happily tromped around the woods for the next several years with my son and other boys. At that time, nothing was more satisfying to me than working with boys and spending a lot of time in nature praying, contemplating, meditating, and pursuing my mystical bent.

About five years later, some significant aspects of my life came crashing down around me all at the same time. One element was financial. I had to sell everything I owned, including my house, and cash in my retirement savings to cover debts created by a company I had briefly chaired at the request of a client before it collapsed. The other principals had either declared bankruptcy or vanished. I decided to try to make things right with every creditor. But even after exhausting all my resources, I still owed hundreds of thousands of dollars. After about a year, I was able to get my family into a house again and begin a ten-year process of paying those debts, as well as building and selling homes with my wife managing it all, while...
MY EXPERIENCES WITH different mystical states came about naturally, as I simply followed where my deepening awareness took me. Only much later, when I became a student of mysticism, did I recognize that the progressions I’d undergone were in line with a well-trodden path frequently described in the mystical literature.

Nature mysticism. When in Germany, I experienced complete unity between what is interior and what is exterior, between myself and all things. I later learned that this very sensory, physical sense of unity, and the practices which access it, are referred to as nature (or physical or psychic) mysticism. This state has a Mormon corollary in the notion of “prophecy”—that ultimately things have no barriers of space or time, that one can bring the past and future into the present.

Deity mysticism. From further study, I learned that my experiences in Harlem involving engulfing darkness, bright light, subtle sounds, and revelatory feedback are termed in spiritual traditions as fruits of deity (or subtle, or relational) mysticism. And, as in my case, in the developmental pattern of mystical experience, deity mysticism tends to emerge after nature mysticism. My meditation and prayers ever since have in part cultivated this type of communing revelatory mysticism, which is also central in the Mormon tradition.

Awareness mysticism. The state of witnessing, and merging with all that I witnessed that I began to experience as I emerged from my decade of high stress, is called in the major traditions awareness (or causal) mysticism. Again, as in my journey, this state tends to arise after nature and deity mysticism have both emerged and stabilized. This mysticism emphasizes being absolutely one. One becomes an egoless witness or seer who sees things more as they really are without the filter of the ego. In Mormonism, we tend to see the role of the seer as an exalted office to which one is called, but it also relates to a core modality of mysticism and attainment of nirvanic peace to which more Latter-day Saints might implicitly aspire if we had practices to support it.

Non-dual awareness. In mystical training and progression, stabilizing and becoming deeply familiar with the non-dual state is the arena of final achievement. It follows after nature, deity, and awareness mysticism. So far, I do not see any practices in the Mormon tradition which open one to the non-dual experience.

Besides these “states” of consciousness and human developmental “stages,” my meditation and awareness practice—integral thematic practice (ITP)—integrates the following elements: ascending (moving from many to one); descending (moving from one to many); tantric embrace and the integration of ascending/descending, transcendent/relative, universal/unique self; and male/female; working with pervasive polarities (i.e., there is opposition in all things); and working with shadow and certain pervasive core themes. ITP emerged directly out of the incredibly comprehensive Mormon spiritual field, and is one of few practices that integrate Eastern and Western perspectives.
and walk what one might call a Mormon mystical path.

Meanwhile, a totally unexpected development related to my spiritual integration occurred. Genpo Roshi, one of the most influential leaders of Zen Buddhism in the West and head of the largest Zen lineage headquartered outside Japan, developed a remarkable dialogue-based process to facilitate people into a “Big Mind” state. “Big Mind” is one of many terms used to identify the state described in several Eastern traditions as “enlightenment.” Big Mind is a state of consciousness that I was somewhat familiar with through some reading I had done. As I had read a fair amount about Zen over the years, I thought I had a basic understanding of the Zen outlook. But I really didn’t get it: one has to experience Big Mind to do so.

I had found no organized practice in the Mormon tradition, or anywhere else at that point, which had opened me up to the non-dual or Big Mind experience. Within a few months of when Genpo Roshi first began teaching his “big mind process,” I wandered into a breakout session of a conference I was attending for mediators (not meditators), in which he facilitated a demonstration of the process. I found myself experiencing that Big Mind state so powerfully that for nearly two weeks afterward, I could barely function, as I pretty much remained in Big Mind around the clock.

I have studied and practiced the Big Mind process (explicitly as a non-Buddhist) and other supportive practices ever since. After four years of teaching and training hundreds, perhaps thousands, of others in this process around the world, Genpo Roshi had certified only four people to lead large-group Big Mind facilitations: two abbots of Zen monasteries, a female Buddhist priest who has since received transmission as a Zen teacher, and me. After practicing deeply in Big Mind and immersing myself in transcedent states accessed “on the other side of Big Mind,” (as I call it) I found myself able to fully re-engage in the Church with no reservations whatsoever. The paradox had evaporated into some kind of unity. My energy literally changed, and during the past decade, I have served on a high council and in a couple of bishoprics.

CONCLUSIONS

S

O, GIVEN MY many adventures in experiencing and mapping various levels of consciousness to me the particular riches of the Mormon tradition, in addition to its specific truth claims, consist of the following:

First are the depth and authenticity of Mormonism’s spiritual field. That field as I encountered it in a dingy apartment in Harlem in the early 1970s, is deep and rich—and, as far as I can tell, unlimited. It invites each of us to explore and deepen in the wisdom, compassion, and presence of the Spirit. It enables each of us to become, in our own contexts, prophets, revelators, and seers and to advance in multi-dimensional ways toward godliness. It includes ascending practices that lead us to come closer to God, to become one with God, and ultimately to become a God. Our tradition also includes an emphasis on descent: moving from wisdom, to compassion, to presence and engagement in the world. We are potentially conduits for post-egoic expressions of Spirit, mirrors which potentially have the capacity to reflect divine discernment, compassion, and service.

The more deeply I have explored and experienced the Mormon spiritual field, the richer and more profound it has become.
Second is that the gospel is open to all truth everywhere. As Joseph Smith taught, truth is circumscribed into one great whole, which implies that every perspective is partial. Every additional perspective and understanding adds to an appreciation of the whole, even as the whole is ultimately unknowable by any cognitive capacity. Each new facet that I peer through is so exciting to me, and in the end, with the aid of the Spirit, each facet also tends to confirm and further my deepening within, and integration with, the Mormon spiritual field. My faith is that the restored gospel is not a container of beliefs and dogmas but an invitation to be open to truth and complementary practices wherever we can find them. The Church's commitment to an open canon gives its members the ability to benefit from the wisdom of other traditions. For instance, I look to my great-great-grandfather Joseph F. Smith, who President Hinckley suggested had a deeper grasp of the restored gospel than anyone except Joseph Smith. President Smith said:

We believe in all truth, no matter to what subject it may refer. No sect or religious denomination in the world possesses a single principle of truth that we do not accept or that we will reject. We are willing to receive all truth, from whatever source it may come. (Joseph F. Smith, Gospel Doctrine [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1919], 1)

In this context, I hope to continue my spiritual practice and act as a catalyst in the Church to deepen this openness and passion for seeking truth wherever it may be found. I believe we can always find some deeper integration of diverse but partial perspectives and that the Spirit will guide us toward sensing that greater complexity. I have faith that we will find the simple truths of the gospel on the other side of that complexity and thereby appreciate them more deeply.

Third is that the restored gospel is ultimately about growth, development, and integration into godliness, even into Godhood. It is about physical, emotional, moral, mental, or spiritual development. It is about evidencing such growth by losing one's self in service in the world. It is about optimizing one's capacities for godliness through the higher spiritual accomplishment that results from husband and wife "becoming one." The restored gospel contains unparalleled richness and depth. I believe that to the extent we adopt more practices in the Mormon tradition that help each of us along the developmental track toward godliness in the multi-dimensional ways to which the Savior has invited us, Mormons will emerge as leaders in global human rights and environmental justice. We will also engage civically in ways that will positively transform the quality of family and community life across the world. In any case, I plan to spend the rest of my life working toward that end.

So to supplement my spiritual practice in the Church, I have adapted the Big Mind process with some of the patterns and resonances of the Mormon spiritual field, and I am beginning to share it broadly. I do not represent it as a substitute for any belief in the gospel or practice in the Church but merely as one complementary approach to deepening in awareness, personal integration, and spiritual sensitivity. I am beginning to share this practice broadly with the Mormon community and with others.

Within these contexts, I feel blessed to be actively involved in the Church. I have also developed a passion for fully empathizing with the challenges of those who are struggling in the Church. I urge them to consider plunging deeply into the mystical experience at the depths of our Mormon spiritual field, to continue to be open to all truths, and to continue on the path of godliness to which the Savior has called each one of us. I suggest that it may very well lead to a transcendent realization beyond the polarities, paradoxes, and, perhaps, even agonies they are experiencing.

It is also in this context that I can say that it is my testimony that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, that the Savior would have each of us become one with him in every sense of that word, becoming priests and priestesses and—like our Mother and Father in heaven—gods and goddesses. It is my testimony that President Monson is a prophet, revelator, and seer for the world.

I offer these words in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

NOTE: John invites readers to learn more about his integral thematic practice might be a complement to a spiritual life within Mormonism by contacting him at j kesler@woodburycorp.com. John currently carries out most of his societal work through his non-profit foundation, the Salt Lake Center for Engaging Community, which explores and mentors best practices for community flourishing in a global environment.

POLAR AUBADE

Like a child hovering in a doorway, the sunlight triumphant over snow, the ice-dangled evergreens, a puzzle of cold and clear, the epoch of winter.
The moment of first light begins with a band of blue, the red and orange, then the imminent rose of midsummer flowers, how they vie for brightness, cool open air, the object of their hunger.
And there in the waves of wild chill and sunlight stirring across the white dunes, a sound, a voice like the wind breathing the clear soprano of theology, a promise that God exists, is here in new-born light, these caps of snow, the crystalline knives hanging fat from gutters, how they prism into rainbows as big as cathedrals, the world.

—R. G. VAN CLEAVE
WITH JOHN-CHARLES Duffy’s article, “Mapping Book of Mormon Historicity Debates—Part I,” starting on the following page, Sunstone launches a new initiative: The Mapping Mormon Issues Project (MMI). The project’s goal is to commission framing articles to orient readers in the various debates relating to challenging historical, theological, and scriptural issues within Mormonism. MMI articles will provide reliable overviews of these difficult aspects of LDS history, theology, and Church administration in a fair, balanced way, thus serving as a good resource to help those who are just becoming aware of the issues “get up to speed” quickly. Readers will receive an overview of the basic arguments, learn the key scholars and theologians advancing the debates, and identify the landmark writings on the issues.

The Mapping Mormon Issues Project will also contain an online component. Through clicking a link on the SUNSTONEMAGAZINE.COM webpage, interested persons will be able to read each MMI article and listen to interviews with its author, as well as with the key persons involved in the debates. The MMI portion of the website will also contain free access to past Sunstone symposium sessions related to the topic, suggestions for further reading, and links to articles and other good resources available online. After the first ten MMI topics are published, Sunstone plans to publish them in book form.

MAPPING MORMON ISSUES articles are commissioned pieces, and the project has so far received generous support from Ronda and Mike Callister of Logan, Utah, and through a few additional directed donations. To date, these gifts have allowed the project to launch the research, writing, interviewing, and gathering of resources for six MMI topics, but the initiative still needs your support. To donate or learn more about the Mapping Mormon Issues Project, please visit SUNSTONEMAGAZINE.COM, contact Sunstone by phone at 801.355.5926, or email us at mmi@sunstonemagazine.com.

We hope you will enjoy the fruits of the MMI initiative and look forward to partnering with you in providing this window into vital discussions for those seeking to better understand Mormonism’s past and present.
BOOK OF MORMON “HISTORICITY” REFERS to the claim that the Book of Mormon is an authentic translation of an ancient volume of scripture. Whether or not one believes the Book of Mormon to be historical in this sense is maybe the most fundamental question affecting one’s relationship to Mormon faith and the LDS Church. Volumes upon volumes have been written on Book of Mormon historicity issues.

This article is the first in a two-part series that orients readers to the historicity question by “mapping” it in different ways. This first part contains three sections:

I. MAPPING THE HISTORY OF THE DEBATES: A summary of how the historicity debates have developed from the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830 to the beginning of the twenty-first century. This section throws light on historical forces that have shaped Latter-day Saints’ views on historicity and that have affected the degree of tolerance in the Church for differing views.

II. MAPPING THE ARGUMENTS: A highly condensed overview of the many arguments that have been made for and against historicity. Written like an encyclopedia entry or bibliographic essay, it may be most helpful as a reference source, pointing you to additional reading.

III. MAPPING THE POSITIONS: A guide to the many different positions that LDS and former LDS individuals have adopted toward Book of Mormon historicity and its implications for LDS faith and church activity. This section shows that Mormons’ thinking about historicity has been much more diverse than a simple mapping of the issue as “pro versus con” would suggest.

In Part Two, to be published in the next issue, I map the historicity question sociologically—examining the social dynamics that sustain or alter people’s beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity. There I suggest that arguments made for and against historicity are actually not the prime factor in forming a person’s beliefs about historicity: relationships with other people are more decisive.

NOTES AND DISCLAIMERS

About labels: Labeling the parties in the debates is difficult because labels tend to be loaded. For convenience, I use the terms orthodox and apologist to refer to those who believe in Book of Mormon historicity, and I use the terms skeptic and revisionist to refer to people who either question or reject historicity. Those I call skeptics or revisionists may or may not believe that the Book of Mormon is in some sense scriptural. These labels are intended to be neutral.

About references: To aid readers in locating sources for further reading, I use parenthetical references in place of footnotes. Use the bibliography at the end of the article to locate sources by author’s last name and the year of publication.

About testimony: This mapping is intended to be neutral toward the debates; the article is not an apologetic either for or
against Book of Mormon historicity. Different readers might approach this article for different reasons. Some may have a purely academic interest, while other readers may be seeking to resolve urgent religious doubts about Book of Mormon historicity.

To readers who may be examining historicity because their faith is at stake, I reiterate the importance of testimony. Any position that embraces the Book of Mormon as scripture—whether or not it regards the Book of Mormon as “historical”—is an act of faith. And according to LDS teaching, faith cannot rest on intellectual conviction alone. It must rest on testimony—on personal experiences that convince readers God is working in their lives through the Book of Mormon. This means that rational arguments or evidence in favor of historicity do not provide sufficient reason for concluding that the Book of Mormon is true. More is needed: a limbic, existential witness to the soul.

The scriptures teach us that the process of obtaining personal knowledge of the truth involves pondering and studying things out in our minds (Moroni 10:3–5; D&C 9:7–9). I hope the information in this framing article can help readers grappling with Book of Mormon historicity to ponder and “study out” the various issues involved. However, from an LDS point of view, one must weigh the issues intellectually as part of a broader process of seeking truth through prayer and examining one’s most deeply rooted feelings.

I. MAPPING THE HISTORY OF THE DEBATES

This section offers an overarching narrative of Book of Mormon historicity debates from 1830 to the present, meant to underscore that these debates do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, they are shaped by social developments such as the expansion of higher education or the advent of the Internet. In addition, they can be compared to debates about science, history, and the authority of scripture occurring elsewhere on the American religious landscape, especially among Protestants. Recognizing those connections illuminates the political dimensions of the historicity debates—that is, we can see how the debates worked to privilege and exclude certain groups or outlooks at particular junctures of history.

Nineteenth-century polemics

Throughout the nineteenth century, apologists and skeptics alike assumed that the Book of Mormon’s authenticity was synonymous with its historicity. The notion that the book could in some sense be authentic scripture without being historical did not emerge until the twentieth century, after some Mormon scholars had been influenced by modernist or liberal trends in Christian theology. Indeed, not until the twentieth century was the term “historicity” used to frame arguments for or against the Book of Mormon.

The first published criticisms of the Book of Mormon dismissed it as a product of imposture and superstition, emphasizing Smith’s involvement in magical treasure hunting. However, the account of the book’s origins most often repeated by nineteenth-century skeptics was the Spaulding theory (Kirkham 1959, Midgley 1997), which accused Smith of plagiarizing the majority of the Book of Mormon from a contemporary romance penned by Solomon Spaulding (more on this in the section, “Mapping the Arguments”). Early critic Alexander Campbell (1831) argued against the Book of Mormon on the basis of internal evidence, alleging contradictions with the Bible (such as placing Jesus’ birth in Jerusalem) and the anachronism of setting New Testament preaching and nineteenth-century theological controversies in Old Testament times.

Book of Mormon apologetics in the nineteenth century developed along essentially three lines. First, apostle offered the testimonials of the Three and Eight Witnesses to support Joseph Smith’s claim about the book’s origins. Second, apologists appealed to the authority of the Bible, whose historical authenticity they took for granted, by citing biblical passages as prophesies of the Book of Mormon. Orson Pratt’s Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon (1850) represents this approach. Third, beginning within Smith’s lifetime, native ruins such as the Eastern Woodland mounds and newly discovered Mesoamerican cities were cited as evidence for Book of Mormon civilizations (Givens 2002). These three approaches—and appeals to the witnesses, to the Bible, and to evidence drawn from Native American cultures—persisted in apologetics authored by General Authorities of the early- to mid-twentieth century, such as B. H. Roberts (1909), James E. Talmage (1924), and LeGrand Richards (1938).

Modernism and early 20th-century Mormon assimilation

At the time the Book of Mormon was published, belief in the historicity of the Bible was the culturally dominant view in the United States. This was true despite the skepticism of deists, of whom Thomas Paine was the most notorious, and despite trained biblical scholars’ awareness of problems with textual transmission and translation (Gutjahr 1999). Beginning in the 1870s, however, American Protestantism came increasingly under the influence of theological modernism, which embraced higher criticism of the Bible and evolutionary models of religion. Modernists regarded much of the Bible as mythic, not historical, and they looked to the Bible’s most advanced ethical teachings as its enduring message (W. Hutchinson 1976). Controversies over modernism polarized Protestants from the 1880s to the 1920s, culminating in a split between fundamentalists and the mainline that has endured to the present.

Culturally isolated and politically besieged in the Intermountain West, late nineteenth-century Mormons were distanced from modernist controversies and their implications for Book of Mormon historicity. However, modernist influences entered the Church during the 1910s–1930s, when the Church Educational System (CES) developed curricula for its seminaries and institutes modeled after religion courses at Protestant institutions and sent instructors to receive profes-
sional training at the University of Chicago Divinity School. As a result, a number of BYU, seminary, and institute teachers during the first half of the twentieth century evidently did not regard the Book of Mormon as historical; some apparently did not even regard it as scripture. They focused instead on the New Testament, ethics, and practical Christian living. The anecdotal nature of the evidence makes it difficult to reliably gauge how widespread modernist influence was, but see Barlow (1991), McMurrin and Jackson (1996), and Reynolds (1999) for indications that the influence was significant.

Modernist influences in Mormonism coincided with the period that sociologist Armand Mauss (1994) characterizes as post-Manifesto assimilation. This was the beginning of the mainstreaming of Mormonism. Especially after the First World War, young Mormons began to leave Utah, obtaining education for professional employment and settling down on the West and East Coasts. Higher education and integration into the larger American culture led to their diminished commitment to traditional LDS beliefs. Mauss's study does not provide data about belief in Book of Mormon historicity, but he does report that by mid-century, less than 65% of LDS Church members surveyed in San Francisco believed that Jesus was divine, less than 60% believed that Joseph Smith saw God, and a little over 50% believed that the Church president was God's only prophet. The numbers were higher for members living in Salt Lake City (85%, 78%, and 74% respectively) but still low by late twentieth-century standards. Given these trends, it seems likely that a substantial minority of Latter-day Saints up through the mid-twentieth century were not committed to Book of Mormon historicity. Evidently their commitment to the Church had other foundations.

In addition to modernism, early twentieth-century anthropology also posed challenges to Book of Mormon historicity. Theories about Native Americans' Israelite origins, which had enjoyed credibility among knowledge elites in Joseph Smith's day, were repudiated by anthropologists and archaeologists operating within new canons of scientific authority. Skeptics could now invoke this authority to charge the Book of Mormon with anachronisms such as those B. H. Roberts (1985) confronted in the 1920s: no horses, no steel, the impossibility of Native American languages evolving from a common origin in so little time. And Mormons, young professionalized Mormons especially, were increasingly likely to come into contact with such challenges. Some believers in historicity responded to scientific accounts of the peopling of the Americas by giving nuance to traditional LDS understandings, granting that other peoples could also have settled in the New World and beginning to develop limited, rather than hemispheric, Book of Mormon geographies (Roper 2003, 2004).
Retrenchment and mid-20th-century apologetics

THE MODERNIST INFLUENCE in CES deeply alarmed J. Reuben Clark, counselor in the First Presidency, whose 1938 address, “The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” insisted that Book of Mormon historicity was fundamental to LDS faith. Clark’s address marked the beginning of a decades-long process of bringing CES under orthodox control. This process included selectively recruiting more orthodox instructors, transferring modernist personnel into less influential positions, and interviewing teachers about their beliefs, thus pressuring skeptics to resign (Mauss 1994; Reynolds 1999). This retrenchment process was comparable to Protestant fundamentalists’ efforts, decades earlier, to regain control of their denominations; but where Protestant fundamentalists had failed, orthodox Mormons succeeded.

By the 1960s, modernism had been effectively silenced in the CES. The authoritative LDS position was that the Book of Mormon is either historical or worthless. Mormonism’s most prominent scriptorians from the 1950s to 1970s—Joseph Fielding Smith, Bruce R. McConkie, LeGrand Richards, and Mark E. Petersen—resembled Protestant fundamentalists in their views on the historicity of the Bible, which they extended into understanding the Book of Mormon as a hemispheric history (Mauss 1994). Another figure with affinities to Protestant fundamentalism, although at a more sophisticated level, was Sidney B. Sperry, a Chicago-trained biblical scholar teaching in the BYU Religion Department. Like fundamentalist or evangelical biblical scholars, Sperry rejected higher criticism. Where historical-critical scholarship on the Bible raised challenges to Book of Mormon historicity (such as positing a date for the authorship of certain chapters in the Book of Isaiah too late for those chapters to have appeared on the brass plates), Sidney argued, to the contrary, that the Book of Mormon actually provided evidence for the historicity of the Bible.

The period when Protestant-style fundamentalism gained ascendancy in Mormonism was also the high point for the use of New World archaeology in Book of Mormon apologetics. The first organized venture to uncover archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon had been launched in 1900 by BYU president Benjamin Cluff (Givens 2002). A half-century later, Thomas Ferguson founded a New World Archaeological Foundation that conducted digs in Mexico with LDS Church funding and was eventually absorbed into BYU, though without an overtly apologetic mission (Larson 1996). Ferguson lacked formal training in archaeology, as did Milton R. Hunter and Paul R. Cheesman, whose New World archaeology-based apologetics were widely received among Latter-day Saints and even used as missionary tools. However, the work of the New World Archaeological Foundation was credible thanks to the involvement of credentialed LDS archaeologists. These scholars were among the expanding population of Latter-day Saints, and Americans generally, who pursued higher education in the decades following the Second World War (Mauss 1994).

The most high-profile mid-twentieth century challenge to
DID B. H. ROBERTS LOSE FAITH IN BOOK OF MORMON HISTORICITY?

IN 1909, B. H. Roberts published an extensive apologetic for the Book of Mormon. A little over a decade later, Roberts was asked to respond to objections about historical anachronism—e.g., reference to horses and steel raised by a young LDS man who had been discussing the book with a non-Mormon living in Washington DC. In the process of composing answers, Roberts became convinced that the scientific case against historicity was stronger than he had realized. He subsequently decided that parallels to Ethan Smith’s View of the Hebrews also posed a pressing challenge. Roberts laid out the problems he saw in two documents he wrote for Church leaders during the 1920s. Roberts expressed disappointment that leaders responded simply by bearing their testimonies of the Book of Mormon; he protested that they did not grasp the inadequacy of the Church’s apologetic defenses (Roberts 1985).

Researchers have disagreed over how Roberts’s own faith in Book of Mormon historicity was affected by the arguments he encountered. George D. Smith (1984, 2002) contends that Roberts became ambivalent, expressing private doubts about Book of Mormon historicity. A key piece of evidence for this interpretation is a journal entry reporting that near the end of his life, Roberts told a former missionary he had come to favor a “psychological explanation” of the plates as having a “subjective,” not “objective,” existence in Smith’s mind (in Roberts 1985, 23). Critics of this interpretation point to the testimonies of the Book of Mormon that Roberts bore until the end of his life and to a statement in which he denied that the arguments he was presenting against Book of Mormon historicity expressed his own conclusions. In this view, Roberts was playing devil’s advocate to help strengthen Book of Mormon apologetics (Madsen 1982; Madsen and Welch 1985; D. Peterson 1997b).

What B. H. Roberts concluded about the Book of Mormon has excited considerable attention because of the symbolic significance of a General Authority losing faith in historicity. If Roberts did become a closet skeptic, LDS revisionists might point to him as precedent for asserting their own right to a place in the Church. More aggressive detractors could paint him as a former Book of Mormon apologist who recanted once he more carefully considered the evidence.

Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims, including Book of Mormon historicity, was Fawn Brodie’s much reprinted biography, No Man Knows My History, first published in 1945. And the most famous rebuttal to Brodie’s biography is Hugh Nibley’s No, Ma’am, That’s Not History (1946). In the decades that followed, Nibley employed his professional training in classics to develop an alternative approach to Book of Mormon apologetics that by century’s end had overshadowed New World archaeology: drawing parallels between the Book of Mormon and Old World antiquity. Because his work inspired scholars who later orbited around FARMS, Nibley is arguably the single most influential LDS apologist of the twentieth century, perhaps in all of Mormon history to date.

Late 20th-century controversies

BY THE LATE twentieth century, American Christianity had been polarized into a divide between “conservatives” and “liberals.” Sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow (1988) attributes this polarization to the expansion of higher education after the Second World War and especially after the 1960s, when baby boomers reached college age. Because higher education tends to liberalize people’s beliefs and attitudes, the increase in the proportion of college-educated church members divided denominations along educational lines. The more highly educated (a category that included clergy) adopted liberalized attitudes on issues ranging from civil rights, to the Vietnam War, to gender and sexuality. Protestant fundamentalists, too, participated in higher education in greater numbers, resulting in the emergence of a new class of fundamentalists—or “evangelicals,” as they came to be known—who, though still conservative, were more moderate than the old-school fundamentalists. One sign of this moderation was that evangelical biblical scholars came to embrace more nuanced understandings of biblical infallibility that stood in not quite so strong tension with the historical-critical scholarship descended from the higher criticism (Noll 1991).

Although liberalization was not as widespread in late twentieth-century Mormonism as it was within mainstream Christian denominations, increased participation in higher education did produce a controversial cohort of liberal LDS intellectuals, while at the same time moderating Mormonism’s more fundamentalistic elements. This increase in Mormon college-goers after the Second World War produced what Armand Mauss has called “the most visible grass-roots generation of intellectuals that Mormonism had ever seen.” Mauss observes further that the generation following that one, the young adults of the 1980s and 1990s, yielded “an even larger (and perhaps somewhat more strident) intellectual contingent, including, for the first time, many feminist intellectuals” (1994, p. 170). Mauss’s first generation produced what came to be known as the “new Mormon history,” the movement that made “historicity” a key term in debates about the authenticity of Mormon faith. The second generation became locked in what one observer dubbed “the Book of Mormon wars” of the early 1990s (Introvigne 1996). Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first
century, a third generation is coming of age in the midst of what has been called “the DNA controversy.”

The new Mormon history and debates over historicity

THE LABEL “NEW Mormon history” was coined at the end of the 1960s to signal a trend among a new generation of professional LDS historians. These scholars wrote histories of Mormonism that sidestepped questions about the historicity of Mormonism’s supernatural claims—such as the translation of the Book of Mormon—in an attempt to transcend pro- and anti-Mormon polemics. This aspect of their work became controversial, however, because both sympathizers (e.g., Shipp 1987) and critics (e.g., Honey and Peterson 1991) suspected that new Mormon historians were not actually convinced that LDS faith claims were historical. If this was true, most new Mormon historians were circumspect about their doubts. However, erstwhile church historian Leonard Arrington (1985), who stood at the center of the new Mormon history, openly declared that he did not believe the Book of Mormon needed to be historical to have religious significance. Debates over the naturalistic approach of the new Mormon history, launched by BYU political scientists Louis Midgley and David Bohn, helped establish “historicity” as a prominent term in LDS intellectuals’ parlance.

In the interest of context, it is worth noting that the recovery, in the late 1960s, of fragments of the papyri from which Joseph Smith claimed to have translated the Book of Abraham, and the discovery that these papyri were funerary texts, probably contributed to the retreat from the historicity of scripture among some LDS intellectuals. Even some orthodox intellectuals have felt pressured to entertain theories that would let the Book of Abraham remain scriptural without being a genuine translation from the papyrus (see, for example, Blomberg and Robinson 1997, p. 65).

Also worth noting is that during the 1960s, intellectuals in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, with whom LDS scholars were building bridges, began to question Book of Mormon historicity as a result of absorbing historical-critical biblical scholarship and liberal Protestant theology. Because RLDS revisionists, unlike their LDS counterparts, held positions in church education and high church leadership, today’s Community of Christ has retreated farther from historicity than has the LDS Church (Midgley 1993; Russell 2003).

The Book of Mormon wars

IN THE EARLY to mid-1980s, a confluence of several factors prompted the emergence of a Book of Mormon apologetic movement unprecedented in its vigor and professional quality. First, the emphasis placed on the Book of Mormon during the presidency of Ezra Taft Benson increased the need to defend the book’s authenticity and invited orthodox scholars to help the Saints draw new insights from the book. Second, anti-Mormon apologists by fundamentalist counterculturalists intened at the end of the 1970s, prompted by the increased visiblity of Mormons outside the Intermountain West and the fundamentalists’ uncomfortable realization that Mormons resembled them in cultural values and therefore might be mistaken for true Christians (Shipps 2000). Third, documents forged by Mark Hofmann, and bona fide historical research prompted by those forgeries (e.g., research on Joseph Smith and folk magic), lent credence to revisionist accounts of Book of Mormon origins. Fourth, junior apostles Neil A. Maxwell and Dallin H. Oaks, both former university administrators who were less suspicious or dismissive of professional scholarship than some older colleagues among the Twelve, encouraged BYU faculty to publish work that would defend the Church from critics. Fifth, the appointment of FARMS founder John Welch to the BYU faculty facilitated the development of a network of orthodox scholars who could use FARMS publications to reach an LDS audience.

Many of these scholars were dedicated to Nibley’s “Old World parallels” approach to Book of Mormon apologetics. They held professional credentials that previous generations of apologists had lacked, and they therefore recognized the inadequacies, by academic standards, of popular apologetic appeals in areas such as New World archaeological evidences. Like evangelical Protestants, with whom orthodox LDS scholars increasingly interacted in the late twentieth century, the new apologists represented a more moderate form of orthodoxy than did the fundamentalistic scribes from mid-century. Orthodox scholars were willing to revise traditional views to reduce tension with modern scholarship, such as promoting a limited geography for the Book of Mormon. Also like evangelical Protestants, however, orthodox LDS scholars dissented from the philosophic naturalism that had come to dominate the modern academy, insisting instead on the historicity of supernatural claims made in the scriptures (Duffy 2003).

Around the same time—the late 1970s through the 1980s—more liberal LDS intellectuals were raising challenges to orthodoxy, on several fronts, that were radical by comparison with the cautious liberalism of someone like Leonard Arrington. These new liberals included feminists and gay advocates in addition to a class of intellectuals who were dubbed “revisionists.” Revisionists not merely sidestepped but argued against the historicity of the Book of Mormon and parts of the Bible, as well as against the claim that the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Translation were actual translations of ancient texts. Revisionists also challenged canonical histories of the Restoration by citing research documenting changes in Joseph Smith’s accounts of the First Vision and his involvement with magical treasure digging. Some revisionists continued to affirm LDS sacred texts as scripture in ways comparable to liberal Christian understandings of the Bible; others appeared to adopt a secular outlook. The existence of independent Mormon forums—notably the Mormon History Association, Dialogue, SUNSTONE magazine and the Sunstone Symposium, and Signature Books—allowed revisionists to publicize their arguments to an extent that would not have been possible earlier.
Never before had so large a group of LDS intellectuals so openly dissented from orthodox understandings of scripture and revelation while continuing to affirm Church membership. One should not overestimate how widespread disbelief in historicity was: a 1984 poll of Dialogue readers, whom one might expect to represent a more liberal contingent of Mormons, still found that two-thirds of LDS respondents affirmed an orthodox view of the Book of Mormon as ancient scripture. The youngest respondents, less than 30 years old, reported the highest rate of orthodoxy (Mauss, Tarjan, and Esplin 1987). Nonetheless, apologists and revisionists alike writing in the late 1980s perceived that LDS orthodoxy faced mounting challenges from within.

During the early 1990s, Church leaders reacted assertively to various developments they judged to be apostasy through official actions such as monitoring the publications of suspect scholars, applying church discipline (including the famous “September Six”), and dismissing BYU faculty. Focusing more specifically on questions of historicity, apologists launched an unofficial orthodox counteroffensive by publishing often trenchant reviews of revisionists’ work in the FARMS Review; at the same time, FARMS collaborated with the Ensign and Deseret Book to publish works of orthodox scholarship. Clashes between personnel at Signature Books and FARMS became so acrimonious that at one point, Signature Books threatened to sue. In another case, BYU historian William Hamblin was alleged to have embedded an insulting message about revisionist Brent Metcalfe (an acrostic spelling “Metcalfe is Butthead”) in an article for the FARMS Review. The largest single skirmish waged in the Book of Mormon wars was Signature Books’ publication of New Approaches to the Book of Mormon in 1993 and the dedication of an entire issue of the FARMS Review to critiquing it. The most serious official sanctions against skeptics were the firing of BYU biblical scholar David Wright for his private disbelief in historicity and the subsequent excommunications of Wright and Brent Metcalfe, editor of New Approaches.

A separate front in the Book of Mormon wars was FARMS scholars’ responses to criticisms leveled by fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants (some of whom drew on the work of Mormon revisionists). BYU faculty members Daniel Peterson, William Hamblin, and Louis Midgley conducted email debates with Christian countercultists that were posted to the web for wider viewing. The late 1990s saw the Internet become an increasingly important forum for Book of Mormon apologists, including initiatives by lay intellectuals outside academia. Among these initiatives was FAIR, an online clearinghouse for LDS apologetics written at a less scholarly level than was much of FARMS’ publishing.

The DNA controversy

THE BOOK OF Mormon wars and other campaigns defending orthodoxy, such as the academic freedom controversies at BYU, cooled down somewhat after the mid-1990s. Clearly orthodoxy had won, narrowing the limits of what the Church would tolerate; consequently, many dissenters or less orthodox members either withdrew or fell silent.

Controversy flared up again, however, at the beginning of the twenty-first century when anthropologist Thomas Murphy (2002, 2003), joined by molecular biologist Simon Southerton (2004), cited recent studies of Native American DNA as evidence against Book of Mormon historicity. FARMS, now an official entity at BYU, was well positioned to organize a public response, the central message of which was that a limited geography rendered the DNA challenge moot. That message enjoyed an unprecedented degree of publicity for two reasons. First, the Church publicized orthodox scholars’ writing on the DNA controversy through the media and public relations infrastructure it had established for the 2002 Olympics. Second, online forums such as FAIR and the FARMS website provided additional platforms from which to respond to this and older challenges by evangelical countercultists and Mormon revisionists. Thanks to the Internet, the number of Saints engaged in written apologetics, and the size of their audience, has grown. Thus the DNA controversy has done much to privilege a limited Book of Mormon geography within the Church, over the more fundamentalistic understandings of earlier authorities such as Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie.

The Church’s current official reaction to the DNA controversy has been calmer than that in the 1990s (although in a sense more assertive, since LDS Public Affairs now monitors and responds to news stories worldwide about this and other controversies). Church leaders evidently wish to avoid making more intellectual martyrs. Disciplinary proceedings against Murphy were cancelled after they received nationwide media attention; Southerton was excommunicated, but for sexual transgression, not for his writing on DNA and the Book of Mormon. Another high-profile revisionist of the early 2000s, former institute director Grant Palmer, was merely disfellowshipped. Meanwhile, Church leaders have solidified their commitment to Book of Mormon geography within the Church, over the more fundamentalistic understandings of earlier authorities such as Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie.

II. MAPPING THE ARGUMENTS

The literature advocating or challenging Book of Mormon historicity is voluminous. What follows is a broad-ranging survey of the major arguments, but it is certainly not comprehensive. In deciding what the major arguments are, I have been guided partly by other authors’ attempts to survey the state of the debate or the apologetic scholarship (Peterson 1997a, 2000; Givens 2002).

Arguments against historicity

The most basic objection to Book of Mormon historicity is the book’s claim to a supernatural origin. Mormon-bred philosopher and friendly skeptic Sterling McMurrin famously expressed this view as, “You don’t get books from angels and...
translate them by miracles; it is just that simple” (in Ostler 1984, p. 25). Apologists might protest that this kind of a priori skepticism denies the Book of Mormon a fair, open-minded hearing. But Latter-day Saints, like most people, make similar a priori judgments when they react with instinctive skepticism to extraordinary religious claims from other sources: a crucifix that miraculously weeps blood; Raëlian founder Claude Vorilhon’s claim to have been visited by extraterrestrials called the Elohim; or, closer to home, the 2001 publication of a purported translation of the sealed record of the brother of Jared made by a former RLDS member.

Immediate dismissals aside, evidence cited against Book of Mormon historicity can be organized under four main headings: (1) parallels to ideas and events in Joseph Smith’s early nineteenth-century environment; (2) parallels to texts that Smith is alleged to have used as sources; (3) purported anachronisms, implausibilities, or errors in the text; (4) challenges to the accounts that Smith and other witnesses provided of the book’s miraculous production.

Nineteenth-century environment

TO SUPPORT THE contention that the Book of Mormon is a product of the nineteenth century, not antiquity, skeptics cite the existence of parallels between ideas in the Book of Mormon and ideas of Joseph Smith’s day. These include early theories of Native American origins, contemporary religious controversies, and political attitudes such as anti-Masonry. In addition, some interpreters trace events in the Book of Mormon narrative to Smith’s own life or psychology. For a general response to assertions of nineteenth-century environmental influences, published in the Ensign, see Porter (1992).

Theories of Native American origins. From the time of its publication, the Book of Mormon was promoted as an explanation of Native American origins. Revisionist Dan Vogel (1986) has argued that the Book of Mormon reflects widely current ideas about the Israelite origins of Native Americans and the existence of a white Christian race, now extinct, who left behind the great mounds found in the eastern United States. Vogel also reports that stone boxes and metal plates had been unearthed from Native American mounds prior to publication of the Book of Mormon. Vogel regards these as “clear indications” against Book of Mormon historicity (1986, p. 72). Orthodox responses to this line of argument (Bushman 1984; Christensen 1990) emphasize differences between nineteenth-century theories of Native American origins and the Book of Mormon narrative, and they counter Vogel’s parallels with parallels that support historicity. See also the discussion of Ethan Smith’s View of the Hebrews, farther down (under “Source texts”).

Contemporary religious controversies. One of the Book of Mormon’s first public critics, Alexander Campbell, charged that the book repeats “every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years” (1831, p. 93). In a similar vein, revisionists have more recently argued for parallels between Book of Mormon teachings and nineteenth-century anti-Universalism (Vogel 1993), debates around the sacrament of the Lord’s supper (Thomas 1993), and rhetoric characteristic of Protestant revivalists (Thomas 1983; Palmer 2002). Apologists respond that there is no reason Christians anciently could not have confronted theological controversies similar to those of the nineteenth century; at the same time, apologists underscore differences between the Book of Mormon’s religious teachings and similar nineteenth-century teachings (R. L. Anderson 1994; Tanner 1994; Tvedtnes 1994).

Political attitudes. Further, revisionists see parallels to political attitudes of Smith’s day. Perhaps the most prominent argument of this type is that denunciations of secret combinations, such as the Gadianton robbers, reflect 1820s-era anti-Masonry (Vogel 1989, 2002a). Other skeptics have argued that the Book of Mormon reflects early republicanism, anti-Catholicism, and anxieties about market capitalism (Brodie 1971; Curtis 1990). In response, apologists underscore divergences from the nineteenth-century environment and argue for stronger parallels to antiquity. Richard Bushman (1996, 2005) maintains that the Book of Mormon has little in common with American revolutionary nationalism, while Daniel Peterson (1990a, 1990b) argues that the Gadianton robbers more strongly resemble ancient guerillas than Masons.

Joseph Smith’s life and psychology. Two psychobiographies of Smith (Morain 1998; R. D. Anderson 1999) read episodes in the Book of Mormon, such as the slaying of Laban, as arising from psychological traumas in Joseph Smith’s life, chiefly the childhood surgery on his leg. Dan Vogel (2004) draws extensive parallels—ranging from striking to tenuous—between episodes in the Book of Mormon and events or situations from Smith’s life, which Vogel theorizes came to be woven into the text as Smith dictated the book in stream-of-consciousness fashion. Orthodox reviewers have severely criticized these interpretations on methodological grounds (R. N. Williams 2000; Jibson 2002; Hedges and Hedges 2005; Morris 2006).

Source texts

SOME SKEPTICS CLAIM to have identified source texts from which Smith drew the Book of Mormon’s contents. The texts around which most such arguments have revolved are the Bible, the Solomon Spaulding manuscript, and Ethan Smith’s View of the Hebrews.

The Bible. Similarities between the language of the Book of Mormon and the King James translation are obvious, and some apologists have been willing to concede that Smith actually copied at points from the Bible (e.g., Roberts 1909; but contrast Welch 1990, who prefers a theory that God independently revealed to Smith a translation that resembles the King James Version). Similarities between entire episodes from the
THE WITNESSES:

THE THREE WITNESSES

LUCY & EMMA SMITH

THE EIGHT WITNESSES

DID THE WITNESSES...

PHYSICALLY HANDLE THE PLATES

OR

SEE & HANDLE THEM IN A COMBINED VISION?

IF THE PLATES WERE PHYSICAL OBJECTS WERE THEY MADE BY...

JOSEPH SMITH?

OR

MORMON!
Bible and the Book of Mormon have been offered as evidence that Smith drew from the Bible, including the Apocrypha, while inventing the Book of Mormon (Roberts 1985; Palmer 2002; Vogel 2004).

A related argument against historicity is that the Book of Mormon quotes from chapters of Isaiah which biblical scholars now maintain were composed at a date too late for them to have appeared on the brass plates (Russell 1982, G. Smith 1990). For similar assertions of anachronism, see Stan Larson’s argument (1986, 1993) that 3 Nephi 12–15 replicates errors from the King James Version, as compared to the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament, and David Wright’s argument (1993) that Alma 13 is a reworking of a passage from Hebrews. For orthodox counterarguments to Larson and Wright, respectively, see Welch (1990) and Tvedtnes (1994).

Apologists account for similarities to biblical stories by observing that we would expect ancient writers familiar with those stories to cast their own sacred history in similar terms (Goff 1991; Szink 1991). Many orthodox interpreters (e.g., Roberts 1909; Nibley 1967; Sperry 1967) have maintained that the presence of the ostensibly anachronistic Isaiah chapters ought to be taken as evidence against the widely accepted theory dating those chapters to a later era—a theory, apologists point out, which is predicated on disbelief in prophets’ ability to foretell the future.

The Spaulding manuscript. Through the nineteenth century, the explanation for the Book of Mormon most commonly repeated by detractors was that Smith plagiarized an unpublished romance by Solomon Spaulding, a Congregationalist preacher. In 1884, a manuscript by Spaulding was discovered that bore no resemblance to the Book of Mormon. However, on the basis of eyewitness affidavits alleging close parallels between the Book of Mormon and Spaulding’s work, advocates of the Spaulding theory maintained that the Book of Mormon was taken from a second Spaulding manuscript, which remains lost (Kirkham 1959). The Spaulding theory has been generally abandoned since Fawn Brodie (1971) showed that there is no evidence connecting Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, from whom Smith is supposed to have obtained Spaulding’s manuscript, as early as the theory requires. Nevertheless, the Spaulding theory still has defenders (Cowdery, Davis, and Vanick 2005).

View of the Hebrews. In the early twentieth century, B. H. Roberts (1885) became convinced that parallels between the Book of Mormon and an 1825 publication, Ethan Smith’s View of the Hebrews, posed a formidable challenge to which the Church needed to respond. (Whether this challenge caused Roberts to lose his faith in Book of Mormon historicity has been a subject of debate; see sidebar, page 40.) Fawn Brodie (1971) and David Persuitte (2000) regard View of the Hebrews as a principal source for the ideas behind the Book of Mormon. Ethan Smith’s book advocated an Israelite origin for Native Americans and postulated that a more civilized branch had eventually been annihilated by tribes who lapsed into barbarism. As a counterweight to B. H. Roberts’s catalogue of parallels between View of the Hebrews and the Book of Mormon, John Welch (1992a) has catalogued their “unparallels” to underscore the two works’ numerous dissimilarities.

Anachronisms, implausibilities, and errors

SKEPTICS POINT TO elements of the Book of Mormon narrative that they maintain are anachronistic, given what is known about ancient American cultures, or simply implausible or erroneous. The arguments to which recent skeptics have tended to assign the most significance are based on linguistics, demographics, and genetics. These arguments hinge on the assumption that the Book of Mormon purports to be a history of hemispheric scope, an assumption that apologists have increasingly repudiated since the 1980s.

Anachronisms. By the turn of the twentieth century, with anthropology and archaeology more firmly established as disciplines, it became apparent that evidence was lacking for the presence in ancient America of some technologies, crops, and animals named in the Book of Mormon. These included steel, cimeters, cement, the wheel (implied by reference to chariots), silk, wheat, barley, and horses. Such anachronisms were cited in a form letter that the Smithsonian Institution used until 1998 to respond to inquiries about the institution’s view of the Book of Mormon. (On LDS apologists’ criticisms of the Smithsonian statement and their successful effort to have it replaced, see Ostling and Ostling 1999; Givens 2002).

Apologists have responded to purported anachronisms in essentially two ways. First, they underscore the instability of an argument from a negative; that is, the absence of archaeological evidence does not preclude the possibility of future discoveries which might corroborate Book of Mormon claims. In fact, apologists can now point to discoveries of metal, barley, and horse remains that suggest these questions are, at least, not as settled as skeptics insinuate (Sorenson 1985; Peterson 1997a; J. E. Clark 2006). Also, items brought from the Old World, like wheat and barley, may have been used on a limited scale and therefore might not have survived the Nephites’ extinction (Ball and Hess 2004).

Apologists’ second response to anachronisms is to argue that Smith’s translation of the Book of Mormon may apply familiar words to unfamiliar but comparable items. “Cimeter” may refer to some other, loosely similar weapon; “flocks” may refer to turkeys or dogs; “horses” may refer to deer (Sorenson 1985; Hamblin & Merrill 1990). Apologists note that reapplying familiar names has historical precedent: it was done by the Spanish conquistadors (Sorenson 1985, 1999b; Roper 1999) as well as by the King James translators, who anachronistically used the word “steel” to refer to other kinds of metal (Roberts 1909).

Implausibilities of a hemispheric geography. Until the end of the twentieth century, the prevailing view among Latter-day Saints was that the Book of Mormon takes place in North and
South America and that the native peoples of both continents are descended from the Lamanites. This view poses serious difficulties. As early as the 1920s, skeptics pointed out that the diversity of Native American languages could not have developed from a single origin in the time frame the Book of Mormon requires (Roberts 1985). Analogously, John Kunich (1993) has argued that the population figures given in the text represent unlikely growth rates for a small colony. Thomas Murphy (2002) and Simon Southerton (2004) have cited DNA studies tracing Native Americans to Asia as evidence against Book of Mormon historicity. Enthusiastic revisionists have hailed the DNA controversy as a decisive “Galileo event” pressuring Latter-day Saints to “acquiesce[] to the empirical data” (Metcalf et al. 2001; Peterson 2003).

Apologists reply that these arguments do not invalidate Book of Mormon historicity, only a hemispheric scenario for Book of Mormon history. BYU geneticist Michael Whiting (2003) concedes that the DNA evidence disproves the traditional hemispheric model for the Book of Mormon. But Mormon intellectuals have been retreating from a hemispheric geography since the early twentieth century (Roper 2003). A limited Book of Mormon geography, which sees the book as being set in a smaller region, neutralizes linguistic, demographic, and genetic implausibilities because the Book of Mormon is no longer understood as the history of the peopling of the entire hemisphere. The population figures Kunich critiqued become more plausible, apologists maintain, if Book of Mormon peoples are understood as small colonies surrounded by and merging into already present indigenous groups (Sorenson 1992a; J. Smith 1997). Likewise, a limited model would not lead scholars to expect to find genetic traces of Israelite colonists (Meldrum and Stephens 2003; Whiting 2003).

Revisionists have protested that a limited geography contradicts a plain reading of the Book of Mormon, as well as the teachings of past Church leaders, and is an “ad hoc hypothesis” serving only to shield the Book of Mormon from disconfirmation (Vogel and Metcalfe 2002; Wunderli 2002; Murphy 2003; Metcalfe 2004). Apologists respond that what the Book of Mormon says about itself must take precedence over what even Church leaders have said about it (Sorenson and Roper 2003; Roper 2006). Sorenson argues (1992) that there is internal evidence for the presence of indigenous peoples in the Book of Mormon, such as the mysterious appearance of the character Sherem in the book of Jacob.

Other implausibilities or errors. Further, several miscellaneous implausibilities or errors allegedly exist in the Book of Mormon. Although arguably trivial, these arguments persist in anti-Mormon polemics originating outside the LDS community, and apologists have therefore been concerned to respond to them. These include the supposed medical implausibility of the death of Shiz in Ether 15; the inability of Nephi’s small group to build a temple like Solomon’s (2 Nephi 5:16); Alma’s prophecy naming Jerusalem rather than Bethlehem as the place of Jesus’ birth (Alma 7:10); and the appearance of the French word “adieu” at the end of the book of Jacob. For replies to these objections, see Daniel Peterson (1997a).

The Book of Mormon witnesses

THROUGHOUT THE CHURCH’S history, Joseph Smith’s own testimony and the statements of the Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses have been proffered as authentication for the Book of Mormon. Other individuals close to Smith, including
his mother Lucy and his wife Emma, also claimed to have handled the golden plates or the interpreters through a cloth covering (Bushman 2005). Skeptics contend that Smith’s and the witnesses’ claims cannot be taken at face value. Drawing on recent scholarship documenting Smith’s involvement with folk magic, revisionists have constructed alternative accounts of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Subjectivity of the witnesses’ experience. Based on nineteenth-century documents, Dan Vogel (2002b) and Grant Palmer (2002) argue that the Three and Eight Witnesses did not straightforwardly see and handle the golden plates but rather had visions of them. If true, this would undermine orthodox claims to the effect that the witnesses’ testimony is “perhaps the most extensive . . . body of evidence in support of the tactile reality of supernaturally conveyed artifacts that we have in the modern age” (Givens 2002, p. 22). Apologist Richard Anderson (1981, 2005) has defended both the personal integrity of the Book of Mormon witnesses and the objective, material reality of their encounter with the plates.

Alternative explanations for tangible artifacts. To account for individuals, such as Lucy Mack Smith and Emma Smith, who claimed to have handled the golden plates or the interpreters in everyday settings, Dan Vogel (1999, 2004) theorizes that Smith was a pious fraud who used deception to promote faith. Vogel elaborates a scenario in which Smith constructed objects out of easily obtained materials, such as tin, that he could pass off as golden plates or interpreters when concealed under cloth. Although no other scholar has fleshed out as fully as Vogel an alternative explanation for the tangible artifacts, many non-orthodox scholars who write about the production of the Book of Mormon subtly signal their conviction that some kind of deception was in play (Duffy 2006). For criticisms of Vogel’s historical reconstruction, see Hedges and Hedges (2005) and Morris (2006).

Folk magic. The Book of Mormon’s earliest detractors cited Smith’s involvement in magical treasure hunting as evidence that he was an imposter or deluded (Kirkham 1959). If Smith falsely claimed—whether sincerely or fraudulently—that he could locate hidden treasures with a seerstone, then that falsehood provides a precedent for doubting his claims about the discovery of the golden plates. Dan Vogel (2004) offers one version of this argument. Furthermore, if the story of the angel Moroni and the golden plates evolved from earlier accounts about a shape-shifting spirit guarding a hidden treasure (Huggins 2003a), this, too, would tend to cast doubt on the historicity of the canonical account of the Book of Mormon’s
ORTHODOX SCHOLARS ROUTINELY acknowledge that faith in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon must ultimately rest on personal testimony. But apologists also insist on the value of marshaling evidence to demonstrate the rationality of belief in historicity. The literature advocating historicity, much of it produced by FARMS, is voluminous, and little of this work has been specifically critiqued by skeptics. Overall, apologists have invested considerably more energy in responding to skeptics than skeptics have in responding to apologists. This disparity has allowed apologists to insinuate that their position has been unjustly dismissed or that the evidence for historicity is too strong for skeptics to rebut. As one orthodox scholar declares, “The failure of those who reject the historicity of the Book of Mormon to respond cogently to the increasing body of evidence and argument supporting historicity is becoming painfully apparent” (Hamblin 1995, p. 82).

Evidence offered for historicity can be organized under four headings: (1) correspondence between the Book of Mormon’s internal geography and actual locations in both the Old and New Worlds; (2) parallels to cultures of the New World, especially ancient Mesoamerica; (3) parallels to languages, texts, and customs of the Old World, especially the ancient Near East; (4) textual analyses, such as wordprint studies, that argue for the implausibility of Joseph Smith’s having authored the book.

**Arguments for historicity**

**Book of Mormon geography**

THE ABILITY TO map the geographical descriptions in the Book of Mormon onto real world locations lends the book plausibility. Apologists have proposed real world correspondences for Book of Mormon locations in both the Old and New Worlds.

**Old World.** Apologists have argued that Arabian geography corresponds to the account in 1 Nephi more closely than Joseph Smith could have known (Nibley 1988b; England 1996; for an evangelical response, see Finley 2002). Based on the description given in the Book of Mormon, Warren and Michaela Aston (1994) identify Khor Kharfot, in present-day Yemen, as the land of Bountiful, where Lehi’s party constructed their ship. Multiple candidates have been proposed as well for the valley of Lemuel (Brown 2007). Aston et al. (1992) link Nahom, where Ishmael was buried, to an ancient burial ground in a Yemeni region called Nehem. A tribal name derived from the same Semitic root, Nihm, appears on a recently excavated altar that non-Mormon archaeologists date to between 700 and 500 BCE, indicating that the name was in use in the region around Lehi’s time (Brown 1999). Terryl Givens calls this altar, and another like it, “the most impressive find to date corroborating Book of Mormon historicity” (2002, p. 121).

**New World parallels**

LATTER-DAY SAINTS have been connecting the Book of Mormon to ancient New World cultures since within Joseph Smith’s lifetime (Givens 2002). Over the years, apologists have looked to ancient American archaeology, indigenous myths and lore, and native languages for evidence supporting Book of Mormon historicity. Such arguments have become more sophisticated since the mid-twentieth century, as more Latter-day Saints have gained training in relevant academic disciplines.

**Archaeology.** Apologists have long pointed to ruins in Central and South America as evidence that there were high civilizations in the New World, with temples, highways, and buried cities, as reported by the Book of Mormon (Roberts 1909; Hunter 1956; Richards 1971; Cheesman 1974). Archaeological parallels played a conspicuous role in mis-
tionary presentations of the 1970s, such as the Church film Ancient America Speaks (1974) or the photos of golden plates, temples, and murals that used to be published as prefatory matter in the Book of Mormon. Interest in corroborating the Book of Mormon led to the formation of BYU’s New World Archaeological Foundation in the 1950s, although the center never directly engaged in apologetics (Larson 1996; Givens 2002).

Some Book of Mormon apologists have been drawn to diffusionism, a minority view within anthropology which argues that long-range migration, including transoceanic contact with ancient America, has been more frequent and influential than the majority view admits. Leading LDS diffusionists include Hugh Nibley (1988b) and John Sorenson (Sorenson and Raish 1990; Sorenson 2005). Among the evidences for diffusion that have attracted Latter-day Saints’ attention are the Bat Creek stone, a purported Hebrew inscription unearthed in Tennessee by the Smithsonian Institution (Cheesman 1975; Roper 1997), and the twentieth-century transoceanic raft voyages of Thor Heyerdahl, who wanted to demonstrate the plausibility of such voyages having been made anciently between the Old and New Worlds (“Interview” 1972; “Thor Heyerdahal’s Voyages” 1989).

Even some orthodox Latter-day Saints have regarded the search for New World archeological support dubiously. Writing for the Ensign, BYU religion professor Ellis T. Rasmussen dismissed the effort as “interesting” but “marginally successful” (1987, p. 53). Sorenson (1976) has complained that amateur ventures undermine serious work in this area. On a much more skeptical note, non-Mormon archaeologist Michael Coe has urged Latter-day Saints to abandon the “fruitless quest” for Book of Mormon evidence (1973, p. 48).

Myths and lore. Accounts of America’s indigenous peoples written during the era of European colonization describe native religions as paralleling biblical stories and Christian practices. LDS apologists during the early to mid-twentieth century used such accounts as support for the Book of Mormon (Roberts 1909; Talmage 1924; Hunter and Ferguson 1950). In his widely read A Marvelous Work and a Wonder, LeGrand Richards (1958) cited an oral history of the Washoe, in North America, as corroboration for the cataclysm described in 3 Nephi 8. Another popular apostle, Milton R. Hunter (1956), drew heavily on lore about white Indians. Parallels to the Mayan sacred text, the Popol Vuh, have also attracted LDS interest from the nineteenth century (Thatcher 1881) to the present (Christenson 2000).

The most persistent use of indigenous mythology in popular Book of Mormon apologetics, including works by General Authorities, is the white god Quetzalcoatl (Taylor 1882; Roberts 1909; Talmage 1924; Hunter 1959; Petersen 1972). Although he cautions against connecting all Quetzalcoatl lore to Christ, John Sorenson (1985, 1999a) proposes that a decline in Quetzalcoatl worship around 200 CE corresponds to the apostasy from Christ’s church recorded in 4 Nephi. Another high-profile parallel drawn between the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican mythology is the interpretation of Stela 5, a stone engraving from Chiapas, as a depiction of Lehi’s dream, an interpretation put forward by BYU archaeology professor M. Wells Jakeman in 1953 (Brewer 1999).

Orthodox academics since mid-twentieth century have avoided lore about white Indians or purported biblical parallels in indigenous religion. The sources are unreliable: Christian parallels may reflect simply the perceptions of European observers or may have been absorbed by natives as a result of European contact. Brant Gardner (1986) extends this caution to mythology about Quetzalcoatl, as does Diane Wirth (2002), though, unlike Gardner, Wirth does not entirely reject Quetzalcoatl myths as offering plausible parallels to Christ. Jakeman’s interpretation of Stela 5 has been criticized by a number of orthodox scholars (Norman 1985; Brewer 1999; but see also J. E. Clark 1999, who proposes that the stela’s imagery might be connected to the Jaredites).

Languages. If ancient Mesoamerica was colonized by people who spoke Hebrew and wrote with Egyptian characters, and who interacted with indigenous peoples, then one might expect to find signs of Hebrew and Egyptian influence on Native American languages. John Sorenson (1997) points to possible connections between the Mayan language and Hebrew; furthermore, he cites a noted non-Mormon archaeologist who asserted that a cylinder seal unearthed in Mexico bears Egyptian hieroglyphs. Brian Stubbs (1996) argues for “substantial similarities” between Hebrew and the Uto-Aztecan language family.

Old World parallels

BEGINNING AT MID-TWENTIETH century, as Milton R. Hunter and other popular apologists were promoting New World archaeology as evidence for Book of Mormon historicity, Berkeley-trained classicist Hugh Nibley pursued a different approach: locating parallels to ancient cultures in the Old World. Because of his diffusionist views, Nibley ranged quite freely over the Mediterranean world and Asia in his search for parallels. Subsequent research of this kind has focused more narrowly on the Near East; such work has been a principal focus of FARMS. Orthodox scholars maintain that the numerous, complex parallels they have drawn to Old World languages, biblical and extrabiblical texts, and ancient customs far surpass what Joseph Smith could have known or what could be attributed to coincidence.

Languages. Early twentieth-century apologists argued for similarities between the Anthon transcript and hieratic or demotic Egyptian characters (Roberts 1909; Crowley 1942—1944). A more modest argument cites hieratic and demotic script merely as precedents showing the plausibility that something like the Book of Mormon’s reformed Egyptian script existed; to that same end, apologists cite the discovery of documents that use Egyptian characters to represent Semitic languages (Tvedtnes and Ricks 1996; Hamblin 2007).

Hugh Nibley (1967, 1988b) traced a number of Book of
Three Things Critics and Apologists Seem to Agree On:

1. Joseph Smith was:
   - A Prophet
   - OR
   - A Fraud!

2. The Book of Mormon is:
   - Joseph Smith's fabrication, and therefore FALSE
   - OR
   - A translation of a historical record, and therefore TRUE

If the Book of Mormon is true/false, then...

Joseph Smith was/was not a prophet...

Therefore, the church he established is/is not God's restored church.
Mormon names to names or words in Hebrew or Egyptian. Perhaps Nibley's most provocative identification is linking the Jaredites' word for honeybee, “deseret,” to Egyptian dsrt, the Red Crown of Lower Egypt (1988b, 2000). Tracing Book of Mormon names to Old World languages has continued in recent years as part of FARMS' Onomasticon Project (“Seeking Mormon names to Old World languages has continued in re-
Red Crown of Lower Egypt (1988b, 2000). Tracing Book of
Mormon names, see Finley (2002).

cism of apologists' claims about Hebraisms and Book of
Hebrew; and that Hebraisms which are present can be ex-
elations in the D&C, which have no purported Hebrew origin; Ashment proposes instead that Smith constructed Book of
Mormon names from a list of recurring stems, prefixes, and
suffixes. Also, Ashment faults the argument from Hebraisms
that the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon contained
even more Hebraisms, which were edited out to make the text
conform to English grammar.

Skeptic Edward Ashment (1993) disputes a number of
Nibley's purported parallels to Egyptian, including “deseret.”
Ashment proposes instead that Smith constructed Book of
Mormon names from a list of recurring stems, prefixes, and
suffixes. Also, Ashment faults the argument from Hebraisms
on several grounds: that Hebraisms appear also in Smith's rev-
elations in the D&C, which have no purported Hebrew origin;
that Book of Mormon syntax dramatically deviates from Hebrew; and that Hebraisms which are present can be ex-
plained as an imitation of the King James Bible. For a response
to Ashment, see Gee (1994). For an evangelical scholar's critici-
sm of apologists' claims about Hebraisms and Book of
Mormon names, see Finley (2002).

Biblical and extrabiblical texts. Apologists cite parallels to
apocryphal texts, or to features of the biblical text that Smith
arguably would not have known about, as evidence for the
Book of Mormon's ancient origins. One of the most popular
has been chiasmus, a stylistic feature of the Hebrew Bible
which John Welch (1969, 2007) first identified in the Book of
Mormon while a missionary in the 1960s. Welch was particu-
larly impressed to find (1991) that the entire chapter of Alma
36 is a complex, extended chiasm. As further evidence for
identify parallels to ancient customs that they believe corrobo-
rate Book of Mormon accounts of antiquity. John Welch
(1997a) draws parallels between Lehi's dream and an apoc-
ryphal text called the Narrative of Zosimus. John Tvedt
(2000) compares the Book of Mormon to hidden record motifs
in ancient Jewish and Christian literatures and even farther
field to the Babylonians and Chinese Buddhists. LDS apolo-
gists have also become interested in the biblical scholarship
of non-Mormon Margaret Barker, who draws on apocryphal lite-
ature to argue that motifs associated with Christianity date
back to preexilic Israelite temple religion. After Kevin
Christensen, a writer connected to FARMS, introduced Barker
to the Book of Mormon, Barker concluded that its use of
Christian motifs in a setting prior to the Christian era is consist-
tent with her own reconstruction of ancient Israelite religion

Ancient customs. As a diffusionist, Hugh Nibley (1988b)
polituated the existence of a common cultural heritage—what
he called the “epic milieu”—that was reflected in the epic liter-
atures of widely scattered European and Asian peoples. Subsequent generations of apologists have been more re-
stricted geographically, focusing on the Near East as they
identify parallels to ancient customs that they believe corrobo-
rate and elucidate the Book of Mormon's ancient historical set-
ing. Despite the new apologists' more restricted focus, the re-
ults of their research fill several anthologies and more.

A FARMS anthology, Warfare in the Book of Mormon
(Ricks and Hamblin 1990), argues that the Book of Mormon accu-
rate depicts pre-modern war practices in the ancient Near
East, as well as in Mesoamerica. Contributors to an anthology
on King Benjamin's sermon (Welch and Ricks 1998) draw par-
allels to festivals, ceremonies, and orations of the ancient
Israelites and other Near Eastern peoples. Another essay col-
lection, The Allegory of the Olive Tree (Ricks and Welch 1994),
maintains that the Book of Mormon reflects a familiarity with olive cultivation that Joseph Smith could not have possessed. Nibley (1988a, 1988b) made a similar argument about the travels of Lehi's party through the Arabian Desert compared to the actual survival tactics of Bedouins.

Douglas Salmon (2000) has charged Nibley with “parallelo-mania”: selecting parallels that serve his argument and ignoring those that don’t, overlooking alternative explanations for parallels, even misrepresenting sources. Less sweeping in their criticism than Salmon, orthodox scholars Kent Jackson (1988) and William Hamblin (1990) nevertheless voice similar reservations about Nibley’s work. (However, see Hamblin 2001 for a defense of Nibley against Salmon.)

Although Salmon (2000, p. 129) implies that his criticism of Nibley is applicable to the many others who draw “endless parallels” between the ancient Near East and the Book of Mormon, skeptics have responded to little of the extensive literature linking the Book of Mormon to Old World antiquity. One exception is Mark Thomas’s review (1991) of Warfare in the Book of Mormon, in which he faults the anthology’s creators for claiming to have corroborated the Book of Mormon before examining parallels to Joseph Smith’s nineteenth-century environment. (For an answer to this criticism, see Hamblin 1991.)

Skeptics such as Edward Ashment (1990) and Brent Metcalfe (1993) accuse apologists of hunting up evidence to support predetermined conclusions. That allegation may help explain the lack of specific response to orthodox scholars’ work: if one believes the work is fatally flawed methodologically, no further rebuttal seems to be needed.

Implausibility of Smith’s authorship

ORTHODOX SCHOLARS MAINTAIN that the multitude of Old World and New World parallels they have identified mitigate against the plausibility of Smith’s having authored the book. In addition, apologists point to wordprint studies, evidence from the original Book of Mormon manuscript, and the book’s literary complexity in general to argue for the implausibility of Smith’s authorship.

Wordprint studies. Technically known as stylometry, wordprint studies statistically analyze word use in texts to identify stylistic patterns distinctive to an author. LDS researchers who have conducted wordprint studies of the Book of Mormon (Larsen and Rencher 1982; Hilton 1997) report that their results indicate the book has multiple authors but does not resemble the writing of Joseph Smith or other proposed nineteenth-century authors. By contrast, a stylometric study of the book by non-Mormon researcher David Holmes (1992) does argue for Smith’s authorship. See Schaalje, Hilton, and Archer (1997) for a critique of Holmes’s study; see Croft (1981) and Ashment (1993) for critiques of LDS researchers’ wordprint studies. Apologist John Tvedtnes (1994, p. 33) has voiced strong skepticism about Book of Mormon wordprint studies, noting that some of the words these studies analyze, such as “of,” do not occur in Hebrew and therefore would not have appeared in what Tvedtnes believes was the original ancient text.

Evidence from the original manuscript. Since 1988, BYU linguist Royal Skousen has managed the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project (Bradford and Coutts 2002). Among this project’s objectives has been to reconstruct and transcribe what survives of the original Book of Mormon manuscript. From his work with the original manuscript, Skousen claims (1994, 1997) to have found evidence that the Book of Mormon is a tightly, but not perfectly, controlled translation dictated from a text that Joseph Smith saw, about 20–30 words at a time, as he looked into the interpreters.

Library complexity. English professor Robert Rees (2002) compares the Book of Mormon to the work of nineteenth-century American authors such as Emerson, Melville, and Whitman to argue that not even those authors could have written the book, much less Joseph Smith. Another LDS English professor, Richard Rust (1997), performs an extended literary analysis that likewise paints the Book of Mormon as a complex and elegant text. Mark Thomas (1999) is another writer who applies techniques of literary analysis to the Book of Mormon, but Thomas attempts to separate his analysis from questions of authorship.

One response to the argument that the Book of Mormon is too complex, and was produced too quickly, to be a composition of Smith’s is Scott Dunn’s proposal (1985) that the book is a product of automatic writing, a paranormal phenomenon in which authors create lengthy, complicated texts, seemingly beyond their natural abilities and apparently under some other influence. Rees (2006) contests Dunn’s proposal, largely on the basis of geographical, textual, and cultural parallels supporting the book’s historicity, though Rees grants that there is some commonality between automatic writing and Smith’s inspired translation of the Book of Mormon.

III. MAPPING THE POSITIONS

THUS FAR THIS ARTICLE HAS SUMMARIZED THE historicity question as if it were a two-party debate: arguments for versus arguments against. But in fact, writers have adopted a wide array of positions around this issue. William Hamblin (1994) organizes views on historicity into five categories: evangelical, doctrinal traditionalist, historical traditionalist, theistic naturalist, and secular naturalist. Louis Midgley (1994) offers a different set of categories, also numbering five. While Hamblin’s and Midgley’s categories are helpfully discriminating, attitudes toward Book of Mormon historicity are even more diverse than these categories make evident.

Mapping different positions on historicity is complicated because at least three separate questions are involved: (1) Is the Book of Mormon ancient? (2) What does historicity imply for the book’s status as scripture? (3) What do a person’s beliefs about historicity imply for his or her relationship to the LDS
Church? To complicate matters further, a handful of authors have recently used postmodern theories to entirely rethink the terms of the historicity debates.

In the following discussion I do not intend to corral people into rigidly demarcated categories. Rather, when I speak of “positions,” I mean simply to identify poles or signposts that can be used to locate a particular view of historicity in relation to others: closer to X than to Y, definitely not Z, certain commonalities with W, etc. The basic message is that Mormons’ thinking about Book of Mormon historicity and its implications is diverse, and individuals who question historicity have pursued a variety of paths regarding their relationship to the LDS Church.

Is the Book of Mormon ancient?

IN RESPONSE TO the question “Is the Book of Mormon ancient?” writers have offered basically four answers: “Yes,” “No,” “Yes and no,” and “Undecided.” Those who answer “yes” vary in their views on how reliable the Book of Mormon is as a record of the ancient past, while those who answer “no” vary in willingness to assert that Joseph Smith was therefore a fraud.

Both ancient and modern. The most discussed version of “Yes and no” is Blake Ostler’s modern expansion theory (but see Rees 2002 for another version of this position). Ostler proposes (1987) that in the process of translating the plates—a process Ostler characterizes as creative, participatory revelation—Joseph Smith expanded the ancient record to include interpretations and commentary relevant to his nineteenth-century context. This approach lets Ostler account for evidences of an ancient origin, such as Hebrew literary forms, and for anachronisms such as discussions of nineteenth-century theological questions. Ostler’s theory has been criticized on multiple fronts. Stephen Robinson (1989) and Robert Millet (1993), defenders of historicity, believe that Ostler concedes too much to skeptics. Meanwhile, revisionist Anthony Hutchinson (1993) finds it absurdly complicated to theorize that God would preserve an ancient record whose message would be rendered unrecognizable by modern expansions.

Undecided. One author who answers “I don’t know” is former SUNSTONE editor Dan Wotherspoon, who has made a deliberate choice to stay open on the question of historicity. He feels that he is “on a sacred journey” with the text and its characters—historical or not— and therefore “Nephi still lives for me” (2005, p. 9). Former Church historian Leonard Arrington stated that he was “prepared to accept [LDS claims] as historical or as metaphorical,” but “that they convey religious truth I have never had any doubt” (1985, p. 37). This kind of open-ended attitude is favorably viewed by Jeff Burton, author of For Those Who Wonder (1994) and the SUNSTONE column “Borderlands,” both guides for Mormons who experience doubt about conventional LDS teachings.

Ancient but not historical? Believing that the Book of Mormon has “historicity” in the sense that it is an ancient record is not necessarily the same as believing that it has “historicity” in the sense of reliably reporting the past. Leading twentieth-century Mormon scriptorians—Joseph Fielding Smith, Bruce R. McConkie, LeGrand Richards, Mark E. Petersen—tended to read the Book of Mormon and other LDS scriptures as if these texts were transparent to the facts of history and the will of God: if the text says X, then X is true. However, other believers in an ancient Book of Mormon have been open to the possibility that the book reflects the limited knowledge or cultural biases of its authors. For example, John Tvedtnes (2003) cautiously proposes that Nephite authors were racist in how they wrote about Lamanites. A vivid example of this approach is Orson Scott Card’s speculation (1993) that the people of Zarahemla did not, in fact, come from Jerusalem but created that story about themselves to facilitate a peaceful coexistence with the Nephites. For Tvedtnes and Card, there is a sense in which the Book of Mormon may be ancient but not fully historical.

Modern but not fraudulent? Orthodox writers commonly assert that denying Book of Mormon historicity is equivalent to accusing Joseph Smith of delusion or fraud. This same dichotomous approach is typically taken by Christian counterculturists (albeit with the conclusions reversed), as well as by some secular skeptics. However, skeptics writing in a scholarly mode are rarely so baldly reductive (Duffy 2006). It is true that Fawn Brodie (1971) and Dan Vogel (2004) are frank about their views that Smith practiced deception in connection with the creation of the Book of Mormon, while William Morain (1998) and Robert Anderson (1999) attempt to diagnose Smith’s psychopathologies; but these authors still paint Smith as a figure with complex motivations who was, at some level, sincerely religious. Many writers, even when showing signs of their skepticism about historicity, nevertheless prefer to write about Smith as someone who genuinely believed himself to be a prophet. Jan Shipps (1985) exemplifies this approach with her insistence on “bracketing” the question of the Book of Mormon’s authenticity while comparing Smith’s revelatory experiences to those of biblical personages such as Paul. Revisionists who see the Book of Mormon as scripture, though not historical, likewise resist implying that Smith was a fraud.

Is the Book of Mormon scripture?

WITHIN THE LDS Church, the most commonly voiced view—a view that has even been enforced by Church discipline—is that the Book of Mormon must be historical in order to be “true.” By contrast, a minority of LDS or former LDS writers argue that the book can be embraced as scripture even if it is not historical. Undergirding the different views are different understandings of the concepts of scripture and revelation.
The orthodox dilemma: Historical or false. From the nineteenth century to the present, General Authorities and other apologists have cast the historicity question as a stark dilemma: either the Book of Mormon is, as Joseph Smith claimed, a miraculous translation of an ancient record, or it should be rejected as falsehood. General Authorities who have voiced this position include Orson Pratt (1850), B. H. Roberts (1909), J. Reuben Clark (1938), Bruce R. McConkie (1983), Ezra Taft Benson (1992), Jeffrey R. Holland (1997), and Dallin H. Oaks (2001). Among LDS intellectuals outside the hierarchy, Louis Midgley (1987, 1990, 1994, 2001) is perhaps the most prolific defender of historicity as a sine qua non for LDS faith. “What is at stake in the current debate,” Midgley warns, “is nothing less than the content and even the possibility of faith as Latter-day Saints have known it” (1990, p. 503).

The orthodox dilemma sees the authority of scripture as dependent on historicity. If the narratives of God’s interventions in history—the Atonement, the Restoration, and so on—are human invention, not historical fact, then the scriptures speak with merely human, not divine, authority; and even their human authority would be crippled by the fact that they teach falsehoods. Robert Millet (1993) maintains that if the Book of Mormon were not historical, it would not have the power to save souls. Historicity is also indispensable for those who cite the Book of Mormon as a witness to the historicity of events recorded in the Bible, such as the resurrection of Jesus (Maxwell 1988; Nyman 1991; Matthews 1992).

Some revisionists (Lindgren 1990; Thomas 1999) allege that the orthodox preoccupation with asserting the Book of Mormon’s authority has led the Saints to pay inadequate attention to the book’s teachings. Anthony Hutchinson (1993) believes that insisting on historicity leads to fundamentalism, authoritarianism, legalism, and false certainty, which in turn constitute a kind of idolatry. Mark Thomas argues that the Book of Mormon’s authority as scripture is independent of historicity: “The book’s authority cannot depend on its age. If the Book of Mormon’s message is profound, that alone should be sufficient reason for serious analysis and dialogue. If the book is not worth reading, no claim to antiquity can salvage it” (1993, p. 53).

Fictional scripture? Revisionists Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalf argue that the presence of obviously fictional material in the scriptures, such as parables, demonstrates that a text does not have to be historical to “be powerful in providing people with spiritual guidance” (2002, p. ix). Following a similar logic, Anthony Hutchinson (1993) calls the Book of Mormon a “fictional work of nineteenth-century scripture,” authored by Joseph Smith under inspiration yet deeply informed by Smith’s own beliefs. To Hutchinson’s understanding, the Book of Mormon as fictional scripture operates for believing readers in a way comparable to how fairy tales help children make sense of themselves and the world, according to psychologist Bruno Bettelheim’s The Uses of Enchantment (1976).

Revisionists display different understandings—some clearer or more concrete than others—of what it means to call the Book of Mormon “scripture.” Vogel and Metcalf (2002), as well as Grant Palmer (2002), suggest that a nineteenth-century Book of Mormon can be read as a religious “allegory,” but they do not specify of what. Mark Thomas writes that, regardless of its historicity, the Book of Mormon “is an authoritative text that serves as a vehicle for sacred power and ultimate value” (1991, p. 62). Hutchinson holds that the Book of Mormon is “a work of scripture inspired by God in the same way that the Bible is inspired,” by which he means that “God’s hand somehow was at work in bringing forth the book which gave this group of Christians [the first Mormons] their separate identity.” Central to the Book of Mormon message, for Hutchinson, is its proclamation “of a Christ whose redeeming work is addressed to all times and places, [and] of the need for humble obedience to God and for social justice” (1993, pp. 1–2, 5). For David Wright, the religious relevance of the Book of Mormon is that it offers a “window” to Joseph Smith’s “internal struggles and spiritual challenges,” thus helping us “understand him much more completely and . . . appreciate the foundations of the tradition he inaugurated” (1993, p. 213).

Orthodox scholars (Robinson 1989; Midgley 1990; Hamblin 1993) maintain that positions such as these reduce religion to sentimentalism—in Stephen Robinson’s words, “a sugar-coated lie” (1989, p. 403). Putting an even finer point on it, John Tvedtnes (1994) protests that imagining the Book of Mormon as fictional scripture makes God a liar. William Hamblin (1994) contends that revisionists who insist that the Book of Mormon doesn’t have to be ancient to be the word of God are missing the point, since what is most fundamentally at stake in historicity is not the book’s status as scripture but Joseph Smith’s claims to prophetic authority. As Hamblin expresses the point elsewhere: “If there were no plates, Joseph was a fraud or a lunatic. If this is the case, why follow him at all?” (1993, p. 12). Kent Jackson poses the question this way: “If [the Book of Mormon] lies repeatedly, explicitly, and deliberately regarding its own historicity . . . what possible cause would anyone have to accept anything of the work of Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?” (2001, pp. 137–38).

The debate over the Book of Mormon as nonhistorical scripture parallels, and is informed by, debates over the historicity of the Bible descended from the modernist-fundamentalist controversies sparked by the emergence of higher criticism during the nineteenth century. The idea of reading the Book of Mormon as scripture but not historical is patterned after similar approaches to the Bible that became well established among liberal Jews and Christians during the twentieth century (Russell 1982). Orthodox LDS scholars with training in biblical studies warn Latter-day Saints not to follow a path that, as they see it, has already led liberal Christians astray (Robinson 1989; Millet 1993; Welch 1994).

Other views. William Hamblin (1994) divides skeptics of Book of Mormon historicity into “theistic naturalists,” “secular naturalists,” and “evangelicals.” Theistic naturalists reject Book
JOSEPH WAS A SHAMAN. HE CHANNELED THE WISDOM OF THE SPIRITS TO WRITE THE BOOK OF MORMON...

HOW THE BOOK OF MORMON CAN BE FICTIONAL & SCRIPTURE

THOUGH THE ORIGINAL TEXT WAS ANCIENT, IT WAS ALSO FILTERED THROUGH JOSEPH’S 19TH-CENTURY BRAIN. THIS, MUCH OF THE 19TH CENTURY & JOSEPH HIMSELF FOUND ITS WAY INTO THE TEXT...

IF THE BOOK OF JOB CAN BE FICTIONAL AND SCRIPTURAL...

WHY CAN’T THE BOOK OF MORMON?

THE BOOK OF MORMON WORKS AS ANY MYTHIC STORY...HELPING US MAKE SENSE OF OUR LIVES.
of Mormon historicity yet continue to accept the book as scriptural; Anthony Hutchinson exemplifies this position. Secular naturalists reject the Book of Mormon both as historical and as scriptural because they reject belief in God. This is the position of someone who abandons Mormonism, and religion in general, to embrace something like positivist rationalism. Evangelicals deny that the Book of Mormon is either historical or scriptural but believe that the Bible is both. This is the position of Jerald and Sandra Tanner, former Mormons turned born-again Christians. One could add to Hamblin’s categories individuals who leave Mormonism for liberal forms of Christianity, rejecting the Book of Mormon but accepting the Bible as nonhistorical scripture.

Jungian psychoanalyst C. Jess Groesbeck represents yet a different position. Groesbeck sees Joseph Smith as a shaman who “was able to access at a deep subconscious level all the fragmented traditions, problems, expectations, dreams, and needs of his time and place, and through the Book of Mormon, to weave them together in an immensely satisfying way” (2004, pp. 35–36). While Groesbeck’s view resembles the “fictional scripture” approach, rejecting historicity while preserving a sense of the Book of Mormon as sacred text, Groesbeck moves beyond the biblical theism of revisionists like Hutchinson.

No doubt other Latter-day Saints hold other unconventional, but unpublished, views. One individual I’ve met, raised LDS but now subscribing to a New Age spiritual style, professes to regard the Book of Mormon as scripture alongside texts from various world religions and metaphysical traditions.

**Relationship to the LDS Church?**

THE QUESTION, “DOES the Book of Mormon need to be historical in order for it to be scripture?” overlaps with, but is not the same as, the question, “Does the Book of Mormon need to be historical in order for the Church to be true?” The relationship between one’s beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity and one’s commitment to the LDS Church has been understood in different ways. The dominant view makes Book of Mormon historicity a prerequisite for Church membership. Others have urged tolerance of multiple views on historicity, and one’s commitment to the LDS Church has been under

**Prerequisite for Church membership.** From the perspective of the orthodox dilemma, it would be senseless to belong to the Church if the Book of Mormon is not historical. If the book is not historical, then Joseph Smith was not an authentic prophet, which means The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not the restoration of Christ’s true church and is therefore powerless to open the way to salvation. This is the logic not only of the orthodox but also of skeptics who upon rejecting historicity conclude that the Church is a sham as well.

Furthermore, if one concludes, from this logic, that to challenge Book of Mormon historicity is to attack the Church’s authentictiy and thus to undermine saving faith, it follows that members who raise such challenges are apostates who threaten to lead others astray with them (see Hamblin 1994 for one expression of this concern). Writing against Book of Mormon historicity has led to church discipline, or the threat of discipline, for Brent Metcalfe, Thomas Murphy, Grant Palmer, and David Wright, the last of whom also lost his job at BYU. Blake Ostler and other advocates of an expansion theory have thus far not faced such sanctions, suggesting that, despite the criticisms of some orthodox intellectuals, Church leaders perceive expansion theories to fall within the unmarked boundaries of LDS orthodoxy.

**Tolerance for multiple views.** Some revisionists assert that, fundamentally, it does not matter whether one believes the Book of Mormon is historical or not since it can be read as scripture in either case (A. Hutchinson 1993; Thomas 1999). Eugene England (1994, 1996), a believer in historicity, nevertheless advocated tolerance within the Church for a diversity of positions on that question. If belief in historicity mattered, England argued, God would have made the evidence clearer; what is crucial, in any event, is to heed the Book of Mormon’s teachings about Christlike living.

**Mormonism without the Book of Mormon.** Some members who neither accept the Book of Mormon as historical nor defend its status as scripture nevertheless value participation in the LDS Church for other reasons. When New World archaeology enthusiast Thomas Ferguson lost his faith in historicity, he continued to believe that Mormonism was superior to other religions, and he remained active out of a commitment to the Church’s social values (Larson 1996). Leonard Arrington (1985) cited Mormon ideals of community and family, free agency, and the search for knowledge as the grounds for his committing to the Church despite his indecision about the historicity of LDS faith claims. Grant Palmer (2002), having rejected Book of Mormon historicity, shows little interest in the book’s teachings; but he expresses continuing love for Joseph Smith’s teachings about the plan of salvation and eternal marriage, and he argues for treating the New Testament teachings of Jesus as the heart of LDS faith.

**Other Latter Day Saint churches.** Official LDS discourse promotes the view that the authenticity of the Book of Mormon leads logically to the truth of the Church’s exclusive claim to divine authority: “If the Book of Mormon is true, then Joseph Smith was a true prophet. If Joseph Smith was a true prophet, then The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the Lord’s Church and is guided by God” (Missionary Guide 1988, p. 135; see also Benson 1988; Preach My Gospel 2004, p. 38). Of course, this logic would be disputed by members of other Latter Day Saint denominations, such as the Community of Christ or the FLDS Church. Thus, deciding that the Book of Mormon is historical is not necessarily the same as deciding that the LDS Church is the Lord’s one true church. The fact that some of the Three and Eight Witnesses later came to re-
to recover a “sacramental” vocabulary for talking about the historicity question.

Rethinking the historicity question

BEGINNING IN THE late 1990s, a few authors, influenced by postmodern scholarship, have argued that the historicity debates are a peculiarly modern phenomenon, meaning that all historicity debaters share assumptions that reflect the impact of the Enlightenment. By questioning those assumptions, these authors open up new ways of thinking about the historicity question.

Dennis Potter advocates what he calls a post-liberal approach to the Book of Mormon. This approach would reject the notion that “science [should] adjudicate everything about the way we see the world, including our religious beliefs” (2005, p. 73). Instead of marshalling scientific arguments for and against historicity, as apologists and skeptics alike do, Potter recommends that Latter-day Saints separate scientific discourse from the questions they ask about the Book of Mormon. One question Potter is especially keen to ask is whether the book helps Latter-day Saints librate Native Americans.

John Williams likewise urges readers to lay aside the “question of scientific ‘truth’” to examine instead the social consequences that different views on historicity have for Native Americans (2005, p. 46). Williams argues that the hemispheric model of Book of Mormon historicity seized possession of Native Americans and their identity in a way characteristic of European colonization, whereas the new preference for a limited geography constitutes a partial relinquishing of authority over Native identity. This fact leads Williams to view the limited geography as a positive development, entirely apart from the question of whether that geography is historically true.

The most elaborate—and dense—postmodern critique of the historicity debates comes from BYU philosophy professor James Faulconer (1995, 2001). Faulconer maintains that modern readers, whether apologists or skeptics, assume that the scriptures are historical, or literally true, if they refer to objectively real events, the truth of which can be assessed by evidence outside the scriptures themselves: archaeology, DNA studies, or other documents of the period. However, premodern (pre-Renaissance) readers did not make this separation between historical events and the scriptural account of those events. From a premodern point of view, Faulconer argues, the only access to literal, historical truth was the scriptural account. Moreover, Faulconer maintains that the only access to literal, historical truth was the scriptural account. Furthermore, Faulconer maintains that the only access to literal, historical truth was the scriptural account.

Faulconer argues that the scriptures, like poetry, “mean without being fully able to refer” (2001, p. 42). This means, among other things, that we must expect the scriptures to surprise us with new, unexpected meanings: “We must assume that scripture means exactly what it says, and, even more important, we must assume that we do not already know what it says” (1995, p. 83).

Faulconer argues that the scriptures should not be “about real people and real events” (2001, p. 44). He takes issue with readings of the Book of Mormon as nonhistorical scripture because he feels that these don’t avoid implying that Joseph Smith was a fraud and don’t offer a clear rationale for embracing Mormonism rather than another religion. Nevertheless, could Faulconer’s sacramental approach open up common ground for readers who regard the Book of Mormon as ancient scripture and readers who regard it as nineteenth-century scripture? Further discussion of Faulconer’s work is needed to tease out its implications.

CONCLUSION

THE BOOK OF Mormon historicity debates resemble debates about Bible historicity that divided twentieth-century Protestant liberals and fundamentalists. A crucial difference is that where fundamentalists lost control of the mainline Protestant denominations, orthodox LDS leaders and scholars have succeeded at stigmatizing liberal views of Book of Mormon historicity. Tolerance for positions that embrace the Book of Mormon as nonhistorical scripture, or that downplay the importance of historicity as grounds for committing to the Church, sharply declined by the end of the twentieth century. Liberal or revisionist views have been forced to the margins of the LDS community by an assertive and expanding apologetic movement, supported by General Authorities and periodically reinforced by church discipline against prominent revisionists.

However, this historical development should not entirely eclipse the fact that LDS thinking about Book of Mormon historicity has been, and continues to be, diverse. Granted that revisionists constitute a stigmatized and evidently very small minority, who differ among themselves in their understanding of the book’s status as scripture. But even Latter-day Saints who accept historicity hold differing views regarding how accurately or transparently the Book of Mormon reports the ancient past or to what extent the translation process may have allowed Joseph Smith’s nineteenth-century ideas to be incorporated into the text.

Because the literature on Book of Mormon historicity is so extensive—especially the literature of orthodox scholars—someone could actually decide what to think about the historicity question by impartially weighing all arguments and evidence. There is simply too much to weigh; and new arguments, and counterarguments, and rebuttals to counterarguments, are continually being produced. The presuppositions one brings to this question, prior to examining specific
arguments for or against, are a critical factor in influencing how open one is to the arguments made on behalf of a certain position.

Part Two of this article will analyze these presuppositions. There I will “map” the Book of Mormon historicity question using social constructionist theories about how people form beliefs and interpret texts. This sociological mapping will highlight the role that relationships with other people play in forming an individual’s beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity. Part Two will also underscore the consequences that those beliefs have for a person’s relationships. I will propose that grappling with the arguments mapped in Part One is not, actually, the most important task for someone trying to decide whether or not the Book of Mormon is historically true.

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Thor Heyerdahal’s [sic] voyages support Book of Mormon, he tells professor.

WAT I BUY IS THE AMANA SIDE-BY-SIDE WITH the frost-free freezer. What they deliver is side-by-side but not frost-free. Coping with my dissatisfaction is evidently not in the job description of the two young deliverymen, who stand in my kitchen scratching their bristly heads.

“You might as well put it right back in the truck,” I say, “because I don’t want it.”

The one wearing the studded dog collar examines the work order as though it is written in Sanskrit.

“You sure this isn’t the one you ordered?” he says.

“Sure as death and taxes,” I say, one of my husband’s pet expressions inherited from his dad, the thought of which makes me feel suddenly old.

Collar boy takes this in with an open-jawed, canine grin, as if awaiting the punch line. He begins scratching his rib cage and I wonder if his leg will begin to twitch.

“Um,” he begins, “I think you’re gonna have to call the office and schedule a pickup. We don’t have enough room for it.”

“I was enough room a minute ago,” I say, “before you took it out of the truck. Shouldn’t there still be enough room?”

“Well, yeah,” he says, “but we’ve got a truckful of deliveries to make, and it’ll be in the way.”

I pause and try to see his logic. I fail.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” I say, “but every time you make a delivery, there will be more room in the truck, no?”

With a sour expression, he looks up toward my French Country border along the ceiling, a recent achievement I’m very proud of. My eyes follow his gaze, the Martha Stewart in me concerned he has spotted an unsightly imperfection. I glance around covertly, seeking out potential targets for his critical eye. In one direction, the kitchen wall sports a framed cross-stitch of the Salt Lake Temple. In the other direction, through the doorway to the living room, the facing wall hides behind a double-wide bookcase jammed with L.D.S. literature. I’m not sure why I notice these things in particular but I do.

“Look,” he says, “we’re only authorized to deliver, not pick up.”

So, he’s going bureaucratic on me. I look to his silent companion, the one who seems wholly mesmerized by the maple sheen of my Pergo flooring (crudely besmirched, I might add, by their clunky, filth-encrusted workboots).

I am, it would seem, invisible to him. Even without my stylishly contemporary floor to command his attention, it’s unlikely he would cast his eye my way. I would be invisible to his partner too, were he not obliged by his position of authority to reckon with me.

Unlike the “hotties” of their generation, I have nothing provocative to offer. No bare midriff or exposed cleavage, no tight jeans riding low on my hips to reveal the tease of an exotic posterior tattoo, but just a freeze-dried specimen of middle age shrouded in marked-down sweats from TJ Maxx, an amorphous relic whose days of doing the Hustle went out with the leisure suit. I’d like to think they see me as more than just an inconvenient speed bump along their delivery route, but see the truth of the matter reflected in every gleaming stud on that inflexible collar. Still, I’m not willing to exchange their inconvenience for my own.

“Couldn’t you call and try to straighten this out now?” I suggest, ingratiatingly.

The conflicted spokesman squares his broad shoulders and, with an audible sigh of exasperation, draws a cell phone from his hip holster. I feel as if I should plead for clemency from this boy, point out that I have redeeming virtues, that I am somewhat more than the drab impediment I might appear in his eyes.

But all I say is “Thanks,” as he punches the numbers on his keypad with a bit more force than seems absolutely necessary.

We stand and wait to the ticking of the faux antique Provincial clock on the wall, an irksome metronomic monotonity I’m noticing for the first time. We wait and wait. Finally, he aborts the call in disgust and rams the phone back in its holster.

“They got the machine on,” he says, “Kelly must be out to lunch.”
“Or parading around the showroom,” he adds, in a tone suggesting the disdain in which office workers are often held by those whose labor involves the use of muscle and sinew. I remember this dynamic from when I worked in the office of a trucking company, the last time I worked outside the home. A debasing and unremunerative job shuffling grimy invoices and receiving slips in a dismal little office infused with a potpourri of coffee, cigarettes and crude humor. It’s hard to imagine myself in such a place now, but it doesn’t seem all that long ago that I qualified as an object of desire, fending off advances from the blue-collar set.

“You sure this isn’t frost-free?”

About as sure as I am that you’ve never had to defrost a freezer, I think, as he peels a strip of tape off the door, opens it and peers inside.

“Well, I’m sure it’s not the one I bought. The one in the store had a black strip running across the middle of the door with the words Frost-Free Deluxe in gold script.”

“Sometimes the ones we deliver differ slightly from the models in the showroom,” he says. “You know; some of the features are just a little different.”

I’m getting ready to stand firm on this particular feature when his partner begins to hyperventilate. He draws a rapidly coupled series of snuffling inhalations—“huuh-huuh … huuh-huuh”—and I’m thinking, Dear God, don’t let this guy have an asthma attack in my kitchen.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

He waves me off with a trembling hand, but I can see the intensity of his paroxysms increasing. I find myself frozen, not knowing exactly what to do. But then it dawns on me: he’s crying. A moment later, he collapses in a blubbering, uncontrolled outburst.

My maternal instincts rise to the occasion, perhaps partly from seeing the brawny, wooden figure of a moment earlier transformed into a shattered, gushing well of human frailty, and partly because I can feel my own tear ducts begin to quiver.

“Hey, it’s all right,” I say, touching his shoulder.

He’s turned his back to me, cringing in shame for the convulsive sobs that wrack his body. I look to his partner, but he has turned to stone, a hand still gripping the freezer door. My own hand slides down the sobbing delivery man’s back, between his shoulder blades, where it moves in gentle circles. I coo words of comfort over a shoulder sculpted like the heel of a fine oak banister.

His chest continues to heave and shudder, but he is drawing deeper breaths now and the gasping, asthmatic sobs are beginning to subside. I can see the tears streaming down his cheeks, mucus creeping from a nostril.

“Hey, come on, Jimmy,” his partner throws in, “it’s okay.” He even mutters a word of apology my way.

“You okay now?” I ask. “What’s the matter?”

He gets to huffing again, his eyes clenched in a portrait of misery:

“All right, slow down.”

“My mom died,” he blurts, the scaffolding he’d erected to bear these awful words collapsing under their own weight.

“Oh, dear,” I say.

I hold him more snugly now, the two of us huddled together, riding out the wave of grief that gushes out like blood from a fresh wound.

“When?” I ask.

“Last week,” he rasps. “May tenth.”

I’m impressed by the specificity, hurled like a curse. I look to his partner, who shrugs, helplessness pasted on his shell-shocked face. His dog collar now looks even more buffoonish.

I guide Jimmy into the living room, a distance of about five steps but feeling like a trek. I ease him down onto the leather-skinned couch, where he hunches over and paws at his eyes and cheeks. It’s a handsome face, though red and gnarled as a crabapple just now. He looks like a California surfer, with a wide mouth and a small nose dappled with a soupçon of freckles, topped by a peroxide blond buzz cut. At any other time, he’d strike you as the prototypical kid next door, with an easy laugh and not a care in the world.

“It was a car accident,” he whimpers. “She was only thirty-nine. Everything happened so fast. I couldn’t cry. All through the funeral,” he bawls, “I couldn’t cry.”

“I sit and hold him as he surrenders again to the burst dam of his strong young endurance, firm and untried until now, thinking how his world was going to be a different place from here on in. I think too of his mother, three years younger than me, torn abruptly from her loved ones and the daily plans and
routines taken for granted. I think of my son at school and my husband at work and the happy fiction that we have control over the time we have left together, an illusion so easy to maintain until you meet someone like Jimmy. Then you realize how suddenly everything you’ve worked so hard to construct, like a house of cards, can be leveled in one fell gust of an ill wind. Soon, you’re fixated on heart attack statistics, the random act of violence, a lump in the breast. But the fixation is quickly replaced by the more practical concerns of how to dress, what meals to prepare, financial planning. And you no longer trouble yourself with what might happen because, after all, there’s nothing you can do about it anyway.

Jimmy’s still snuffling and choking back sobs but appears to be drying up. I sit stiffly erect beside him, at an angle, like a ventriloquist at a loss for words. In the matching leather chair facing the couch sits Jimmy’s partner, tense and sober-faced. I look past the collar at the way his rosy ears lie flat against his close-cropped skull and at the cat’s-tongue of black fuzz cultivated in the hollow of his rounded, boyish chin. A boy with a mother somewhere, a man-boy breathing his last gasp of youthful defiance and nose-thumbing self-expression, caught between the rock of post-adolescent angst and the hard place of adulthood. “How can somebody just be here,” Jimmy stammers, “and then not?”

I have no plan for how to respond to this.

“Jimmy,” I say slowly, “I don’t know why things like this happen. But I know your mom is okay where she is and that she didn’t just disappear. In my faith, we believe that families are forever, and that death doesn’t change that, no matter how much it hurts when someone we love dies. I know you’ll see your mom again, Jimmy. I know it.”

And there it is. I take a deep breath and await the fallout.

“I’m a Mormon,” I say, and immediately feel as if the very furniture in the room looks askance at me. “Is that Christian?” “Yes,” I say. “In fact, we-” “My mom’s a Christian,” he sputters. “She goes to church every Sunday.”

The morning’s episode leaves me in a funk for the rest of the day.
THE MORNING’S EPISODE leaves me in a funk for the rest of the day. I can’t dredge up the enthusiasm to fix lunch, so I nibble crackers through the afternoon. The rumpled pile of dirty laundry in a corner of the master bedroom glowers at me each time I saunter by, a shadowy reproach lurking in its peaks and crevices. I scrub my plans to paper the kitchen shelves to match the decorative border, and ignore the shrink-wrapped rolls of contact paper sprawled on the dining room table. The rooms exude a mournful quality and my carefully chosen furnishings smack of futility. I slink from room to room, lethargic and unmotivated, dawdling until my son bursts in at three o’clock, dumping his backpack on the bed and manning his station at the Nintendo. I plop onto the couch and fondly observe his mechanical movements, reluctant to disrupt his comfortable routine.

Later, I pull together a meal in time for my husband’s six-thirty arrival. I mention that they delivered the wrong fridge this morning. No one says much, and the evening slips quietly by. In bed, though, I turn to my husband and spill out an account of my morning. He lays his book aside and listens.

“Really?” he says. “He started crying?”

My husband’s wide-eyed attention allows me to see the experience with new eyes, and gradually, through the telling, I come to appreciate the sheer unlikelihood of what had transpired. After we talk our way through and around it, exchanging sympathy for Jimmy’s tragedy, I lie awake for some time before drowsiness overtakes me. The last thing on my mind is Jimmy’s freckled nose and the grief-ridden words: Love him while you can.

AT NINE THE next morning, a truck rumbles up the drive. Two new deliverymen appear at my door, their earnest faces framed in the peek-a-boo window. Brisk and businesslike, they install the Frost Free Deluxe in a cool twenty minutes, including the hookup for the water dispenser. I sign their clipboard, and they’re out the door.

I go about my morning with a lighter heart, delighted with the new fridge. As the morning unfurls, however, my thoughts turn to Jimmy and the unexamined details of our brief encounter. Their navy coveralls with Appleton Appliance stitched over the pocket in lustrous red, the sharply pointed twin A’s dwarfing the other letters. The sharp clack of the cell phone being rammed in its holster. The knobby ridge of Jimmy’s spine as my hand traced undulating circles over his sloped back.

With a spasm of horror, I recall my smarty-pants crack about death and taxes, made innocently enough at the time, but now I’m convinced that that was what had set him off. While I played the Good Samaritan, was he aware that I had been the catalyst for his wretched state? The more I think about it, the worse I feel. No wonder he’d disappeared into the truck without a backward glance or a parting word. And I’d had the gall to think that I’d done some good, that my “inspired” attempt to provide solace might have found its mark and borne the fruit of promise. Which is just another way of saying that a broken young man’s vulnerability had brought out the Mormon in me, that I’d discounted his earthly flesh-and-blood affairs and gone straight for his soul. I know you’ll see your mom again, Jimmy. The sheer audacity! At the end of the day, were all my social graces merely a façade concealing the heart of a dyed-in-the-wool proselytizer?

I continue to brood under a cloud of regret that follows me through the house, inhibiting my actions and coloring the morning in somber shades of blue. The kitchen blinds cleave the sunlight into thin bars of dark and light thrown against me as I measure the shelves. I peel the shrink-wrap from a roll of contact paper and toss it in the trash, but no, it sticks to my hand, doesn’t want to be let go, angers me with its stubborn, clingy plasticity until I nearly go to tears flailing my hand maniacally over the trash.

Seated at the dining room table, I spread out the contact paper. I can do this, I tell myself. I’m a good person, with a good home and a good family. Good intentions. Put Norah Jones on the stereo and get to work.

By noon I’ve covered three shelves. It’s
taken far longer than it should have, and there are many shelves remaining, but those I’ve done look nice and I’ll simply pick up the pace after lunch. Resolving to finish the job before Matty gets home from school, I make a salad and bring in the mail.

While picking at my salad I sift through the bushel of ads and assorted junk mail. A glossy brochure from Appleton Appliance catches my eye and I draw it from the pile. The brochure thanks me for my recent purchase and invites me to consider their wide range of modern household appliances.

I’m about to toss the brochure aside when I notice a folded sheet of paper stapled to the back. Thinking it might be a discount coupon, I tear it off and open it. The handwriting is small and sloppy and the words fill the entire sheet.

Dear Mrs. Peterson,
Thank you for being so nice to me this morning. When you held my hand and talked to me so softly I felt like my Mom was there beside me with all her goodness and caring coming out through you. I really think she was there with me and I believe I’ll see her again some day. Thank you for caring. I hope you like your new refrigerator and that you will continue to be a customer of Appleton Appliance.
Sincerely,
James V. Coletti (Jimmy)

The somber shades of blue lighten, blear and run as I hunch intently over the note, reading Jimmy’s words. My hands are shaking, so I lay the note down and rub my eyes, blinking the world back into focus. I run a finger over the formal signature, the middle initial. Vincent, I’m guessing. I turn over the brochure and see that there isn’t any postage. He had come back on his own. Thank you, James, I whisper, thinking how sometimes all it takes to do good in the world comes down to an open heart and a willing hand.

I’m STILL A Mormon and always will be, with all that that entails, but I decide there are worse things to be. I’m also a wife and mother approaching middle age, and that’s okay too. If I were a generation younger, maybe tattoos and tight jeans and dog collars would hold some appeal. But I seriously doubt it. My husband looks pretty darn good without a collar, and I look pretty good beside him. Together, we’re a single package—he, our son and me—the way we look, the home we live in, the love we share, and the faith that holds it all together.

I can sit and ponder my beliefs and motivations, second guess my every word and deed, grope for airtight justifications for how I choose to live my life and why I view my own standards as universally applicable. Saintly or arrogant? Sympathetic or self-righteous? Humility or vanity?

I can sit and consider these things until the Second Coming, when in fact they are considered every day, in the fleeting space of a heartbeat, each time the world beckons me to dance to its own tune. But I have a tune of my own, one that is gradually becoming easier for me to sing out loud, one that others may not find offensive and even dance to themselves. It would be so easy to surrender to self-doubt and wallow in the lukewarm waters of equivocation, but instead I simply reach for my safety scissors because, let’s face it, there’s no escape hatch or wiggle room in my established faith, my drab and joyless shelves await their shiny new makeover, and there’s a lot of work still to be done.

WE WALK THE STREET

When teamster wagons clogged the downtown streets my father the boy hoisted barrels from wagons sometimes the bartenders slipped him pennies passed him herring slices horses dropped in the streets their hearts stripped bare people died at home bewildered stifled in pain under quilts stained with blood and phlegm the world played different tunes on varied streets I was a boy hauling sugar sacks and chemical barrels my heart beating machine gun bursts face scored by chemical splashes my father the man polished rings and clips for rich folks breathing the fatal dust of dim lofts weekends we gallivanted on subways rattling to Coney Island and salt water thrills jostling thousands swarming to the gritty surf cramming hot dogs and foamy root beers strivers working up and down the booming street worshipping at the temple of the shining future cutting a path for newer strivers forever casting a sharp eye at the curb.

—GERALD ZIPPER

HAIKU

on the back pew boys measuring their biceps with a striped tie

—ELIZABETH PETTY BENTLEY
LET US REASON TOGETHER

ON THE INEVITABILITY OF GAY MARRIAGE

By Matt Thurston

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OMEWHERE IN THE roiling sea of the gay marriage debate—where the determined boats of prophetic proclamation, scientific speculation, political posture, and bleeding-heart babbling bob and weave—stand two immovable pillars. Like towering lighthouses, they patiently endure the pounding sea, barely taking notice of the pitching and tossing craft below.

The pillars are two immutable facts:

• The onward march of civilization.
• The LDS imperative to maintain an “optimal tension” with the world.

To support the first pillar, I turn to the sage advice of Levi Peterson:

Many Mormons see little value in the process of civilization. Some of them tend to regard the Church as a culture which gives to but does not take from its sister cultures in the world, particularly in such essential matters as theological insight and moral understanding. Such things, in their view, come strictly through revelation, and it is the role of the Church to dispense them to the world through missionary work. It is inconceivable that an increased understanding of perfection might come to the Church from the wisdom which slowly accumulates through the civilized development of the human conscience in many cultures.

Certain other Mormons are even more militaristically conscious of their disinterest for civilization, which they express by rejecting the world at large as the symbolic Babylon from which the Church, as God’s specially anointed society, is to keep itself unspotted. This view tends to take on a doomsday color, for the changes occurring in non-Mormon cultures are often seen as totally corrupt and retrogressive, tainted by sin and worthy of destruction. Everywhere are wars and rumors of wars without end and perversities and whoredoms beyond calculation. Armed with the horizon, and the fearful settle into the fortress of their righteousness to await the imminent end of the world—something like Jonah, who supposed there was nothing in the city of Nineveh worthy of salvation.

This cynical view of civilization is unfortunate. The Church is not a detached and isolated island; it has a symbiotic, interdependent relationship with numerous other cultures, with whose people its members commingle on a daily basis. Civilization is a social process which produces the most dramatically precisely when such interaction takes place. A new insight, a new value, a new tool passes from person to person, crossing boundaries and domesticate itself in various cultures, stimulating among its recipients further inventions and discoveries.¹

Civilization, what Peterson calls the incremental “development of the human conscience,” inevitably marches on. Even in the minds of most conservative members, there seems to be little doubt that the world will eventually accept gay marriage, whether Prop 8 is defeated this fall or not. Heterosexual-only marriage is taking on water like the Titanic, and though the water may not have reached the tipping point, the end is a “mathematical certainty.”

BRUCE ISMAY (a.k.a. Titanic’s venal businessman): But this ship can’t sink!
THOMAS ANDREWS (a.k.a. Titanic’s builder): She is made of iron, sir. I assure you, she can. And she will. It is a mathematical certainty.

O the question is not whether the world will accept gay marriage; the question is whether the Mormons will follow.

The answer to that question is the second pillar: The LDS imperative to maintain an “optimal tension” with the world:

Since shelving plural marriage in the late 1800s, the Church has steered a course that allows its members to be both “in” and “out” of the world. We maintain a healthy distance, or “optimal tension” between the Church and the world, but we will never let the distance or gulf grow too wide (or too close). Armand Mauss convincingly details this phenomenon in The Angel and The Beehive as the ongoing process of assimilation and retrenchment.

If survival is the first task of the movement, the natural and inevitable response of the host society is either to domesticate the movement or to destroy it. In seeking to domesticate or assimilate it, the society will apply various kinds of social control pressures selectively in an effort to force the movement to abandon at least its most unique and threatening features. To the extent that the society succeeds in the domestication effort, the result will be the eventual assimilation of the movement. Failing to achieve sufficient domestication, the host society will eventually resort to the only alternative: persecution and repression.

Movements which, like Mormonism, survive and prosper are those that succeed in maintaining indefinitely an optimal tension between the two opposing strains: the strain toward greater assimilation and respectability, on the one hand, and that toward greater separateness, peculiarity, and militancy, on the other. Along the continuum between total assimilation and total repression or destruction, there is the narrow segment on either side of the center, and it is within this narrower range of socially tol-
erable variation that movements must maintain themselves, pendulum-like, to survive.

If, in its quest for acceptance and respectability, a movement allows itself to be pulled too far toward assimilation, it will lose its unique identity altogether. If, on the other hand, in its quest for uniqueness of identity and mission, it allows itself to move too far toward an extreme rejection of the host society, it will lose its very life. Its viability and its separate identity both depend on a successful and perpetual oscillation within a fairly narrow range along a continuum.

Between two alternate modes of oblivion.2

So, unless the Church reverses its course to become a truly (not just “sort of”) “peculiar people,” (think FLDS, Amish, or other fringe groups who doggedly refuse to shift with the world), it will continue to shift along the continuum with the rest of civilization.

We’re seeing it now: the Church has slowly adopted a decidedly “softer” stance toward same-sex attraction since the charged rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s (i.e., homosexuality is an abomination on par with bestiality).

At some point down the road—the next generation? the generation after that?—the optimal tension between the Church and the rest of civilization on the issue of gay marriage will become so strained that a revelation may be required. We have ample precedent—the Manifesto of 1890 and the revelation of 1978 are both fairly clear-cut.

If course, reducing divine revelation to a mere sociological phenomenon is a blunt and unnecessary conclusion. But there is still ample room for the mystical or spiritual, for the guiding hand of the Divine. I return to Peterson’s thoughts on the process of civilization:

Given the fact of proximity and interaction, the Church inevitably influenced its sister cultures, not merely by proselyting converts from among them but also by the example it gives of Christian living. But one does no dishonor to the divine mission of the Church by admitting that, in its turn, the Church is highly influenced by the world, sometimes even in matters relating to Christian living.

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Evidence for this assertion may be seen in events preceding the revelation of 1978 which extended the priesthood to Mormon men of all races. That revelation was an immense relief to numerous Mormons, whose united concern and questioning about the inequality of the former policy had moved the prophet to seek a revelation on the matter. But why should Mormons of the 1970s have been so concerned when Mormons of the 1920s were not? The reason is that they had been influenced by the growing racial equality in other cultures.3

Why can’t the influence of civilization be a part—sometimes even a key component—of revelation? Don’t we have ample precedent for this as well? Don’t we have a long track record of accepting all truth, “let it come from whence it may”? Don’t we recognize that the light of Christ shines on all of God’s children? Don’t we accept that many of civilization’s greatest advances, whether spiritual, scientific, technological, or industrial, have come from non-Mormons?

The idea that God influences all of his children throughout the world, one person at a time, gives me goosebumps. Sometimes, because of our unique gifts, our “readiness,” our sensitivity to this or that issue, Mormons are the first to hear God’s still, small voice, and we set the example for the rest of the world. But other times, other groups or cultures are better prepared, and God chooses them to go first. We were not the first church to reject plural marriage, to accept worthy black men into the priesthood, to approve of interracial marriage, to eliminate blood atonement oaths, to back away from strict prohibitions on birth control, to accept women in the workplace (though that is still gradual and grudging), or to establish a humanitarian services program for disaster victims not of our faith.

Perhaps the clearest example of Mormonism following other faiths to a truth is the lifting of the priesthood ban against blacks. The healthy or “optimal tension” had become stressed during the civil rights movement of the ’50s and ’60s and had become seriously strained by 1978. By then, the major civil rights wars had been fought and won, and we had been left standing on the wrong side of the line. Today, were the ban still in effect, the tension would be unbearable. Without the revelation, Mormonism would have stagnated or slumped in developed countries, would be essentially non-existent in black Africa, and would have been thrust into turmoil in multi-racial societies like Brazil and the United States. Today, the Church would be well on its way to becoming a fringe group, such as the FLDS or the Amish. Its international footprint, its mainstream acceptance (and even respect) in society today, would be gone.

Is it not possible that history will again repeat itself?

NOTES

LET US REASON TOGETHER

WHY MORMONISM CAN’T ABIDE GAY MARRIAGE

By Christopher Bigelow

YES, CIVILIZATIONS NATURALLY evolve, as do human organizations on a smaller scale, including the LDS Church. Matt Thurston does a marvelous job of marshaling the arguments of Levi Peterson and Armand Mauss to show how this process occurs and how the LDS Church’s evolution is directly affected by its host civilization’s evolution.

All three writers, however, seem to share a basic assumption that human civilization inevitably progresses in a positive direction, which is sometimes not the case.

When Mormons adopted the practice of polygamy, we were the ones trying to evolve, not the host civilization, which continued to champion traditional heterosexual monogamy. In order to maintain that optimal tension of which Mauss speaks, we Mormons had to return to the marital status quo, at least in terms of earthly practice. And with the tolerance of our host civilization, we enjoyed much growth and progress during the twentieth century.

When our host civilization underwent the civil rights movement and evolved in the morally correct direction of full racial equality, the LDS Church was left dragging its feet in the old racist status quo, but we eventually came around because it was the right thing to do, in harmony with the gospel.

When our host civilization found itself considering making men’s and women’s social roles and functions interchangeable through the Equal Rights Amendment, the LDS Church sensed a threat and resisted in an unprecedentedly high-profile way. Now, some thirty years and millions of stressed-out women later, many women question whether they really can, should, or even want to have it all. The LDS Church made its choice, and fortunately the host civilization opted not to change the fabric of society in such a fundamental way, or we would have found ourselves struggling to maintain our place within it.

Today, we find ourselves at another major evolutionary crossroads with gender-neutral marriage. As counter-gay activist Janice Graham writes, “Even though the Equal Rights Amendment was defeated in 1973, the feminist push for androgyny (to blend the sexes beyond recognition) was picked up by the gay movement and pressed on in the media, in the academy, in the legislatures, and in the courts.”

Judging by the courts and legislatures, and in the media, the gay movement and the tolerance of our host civilization, we venerate it as sacred.

Is there any chance that Mormons can maintain our optimal tension with society this time around? Or is our host civilization evolving in a direction we can’t follow?

Following is some Mormon spiritual and theological reasoning concerning whether same-sex marriage could find a place in the Mormon plan of salvation and thus become acceptable to Mormons.

Many Mormons understand the purpose of life as a test or schooling experience. Our spirits assume physical bodies and we learn through trial, error, and repentance to become more like God, which we can ultimately accomplish only through the Savior’s atonement. The Mormon gospel is replete with standards and commandments designed to bring us closer to God and help us be more like him. Anything that detracts or detours us from this goal is the antithesis of the Mormon gospel.

According to Mormon belief, we are created in the image of God (Moses 6: 9), who we believe has a body with parts and passions, which many Mormons interpret to include genitals. From youth, we are told that the body is sacred and should be treated with reverence and respect, like a temple (1 Corinthians 6: 19). Mormon doctrine states that God himself is married and that eternal marriage is, in fact, the key to exaltation, which most Mormons understand to mean becoming eternally procreative parents like God (D&C 132:19). In fact, many Mormons believe that the heavenly parents engage in a celestial form of sexual congress.

To Mormons, marriage is holy, meaning that it has divine qualities, and we venerate it as sacred. For Mormons, even earthly marriages not sealed in the temple have holy potential, as evidenced by our practice of performing posthumous sealings for any and all couples ever married on this earth. According to Mormon doctrine, then, same-sex “marriages” would, by our definition of marriage, have to be defined as holy—in other words, as potentially divine and godlike.

Is our host civilization evolving in a direction we can’t follow?

CHRISTOPHER BIGELOW, along with being a graduate of Emerson College and Brigham Young University, co-founded the Mormon literary magazine Irrelevant and the satirical Mormon newspaper The Sugar Beet. He worked as an Ensign editor and has authored five books on Mormon themes. He runs a Mormon press called Zarahemla Books and blogs at CKBIGELOW.BLOGSPOT.COM.
In order for same-sex marriage to be accepted by Mormons, we would need to become convinced that God himself could conceivably engage in such a union, including its sexual implications. To put it more bluntly, unless God himself could be gay and still be God, then there’s no room for homosexuality in Mormon doctrine.

Some might argue that the Mormon imagination has conceived of God having polygamous sexual relationships making the Mormon imagination more elastic than most Christians’ imaginations, so this next leap of imagination to gay marriage wouldn’t seem out of the question. However, there’s clear biblical precedent for polygamy (Genesis 31:17, 2 Samuel 5:13, 1 Kings 11:3), and polygamy serves a clear procreative purpose. In contrast, the Bible specifically condemns same-sex copulation (Leviticus 18:22–23), and sodomy offers no procreative benefits.

As I see it, the bottom line is that we Mormons would have to give up our theological integrity to accommodate gay marriage. If we thought that God could be gay, our eternally procreative, marriage-based doctrine would collapse like a house of cards.

In the nineteenth century, Mormons espoused a principle that the civilization could not abide, and the civilization eventually pressured us to abandon earthly polygamy, although we continue to hold polygamy as an eternal principle. The twentieth century was the eye of the storm, during which we maintained Mauss’s optimal tension. In the twenty-first century, our host civilization is espousing a principle that Mormonism cannot abide, and I expect that the civilization will pressure us to accept gay marriage with every bit as much force as they employed to make us abandon polygamy. But I think we’re going to hold firm this time, simply because our doctrine won’t allow us to do otherwise.

I don’t know where future social tension on this issue will take us, but I believe that we’re living in the latter days and that if anything fails, it will be worldly civilization, not the Lord’s earthly kingdom.

NOTES


BOOK REVIEW

A PECULIARLY ORTHODOX FANTASY

BROTHER BRIGHAM
by D. Michael Martindale
Zarahemla Books, 2007
260 pages, $15.95

Reviewed by Mathew N. Schmalz

HAD JUST finished teaching a late afternoon class and was checking my email. I was expecting the usual cyber-missives from students, interspersed with solicitations from textbook publishers and inquiries from Catholic watchdog groups asking whether I, a Catholic professor at a Catholic institution, was teaching authentic Catholic doctrine. Same old, same old.

But that day an email arrived from an unanticipated correspondent: Paul Rolly, a Salt Lake Tribune columnist. Rolly was curious about what I was teaching “Catholic kids” about Mormonism. He was specifically interested in what he described as a rather unanticipated order I had placed with Zarahemla Books, a Provo-based publishing house specializing in LDS fiction.

I had ordered Brother Brigham, a novel written by D. Michael Martindale, for my “Modern Religious Movements” class, which examines the LDS tradition. I explained to Rolly that, by making Brother Brigham a focus of class discussion, I hoped to emphasize the complexity and diversity of literary tastes in contemporary Mormonism. Brother Brigham is a supernatural thriller, with tantalizing, but by no means obscene, mentions of sexuality. As such, it gives readers the sense that much more goes on in LDS culture than G-rated celebrations of domesticity and conventional gender roles.

While Rolly accurately represented these points in his resulting column, a minor ruckus did ensue. I received a couple of phone calls from irate Utah Catholics concerned that I was presenting Mormonism in a positive light. Comments posted on the Tribune’s website expressed shock that a professor would teach Mormonism through a single fictional novel—evidently missing the point that Brother Brigham was only one of a variety of readings I was using in the course. I also received a phone call from a book review editor for a magazine in southern Utah who insisted that I should use some different texts and authors next time around. If nothing else, the rather intense nature of this particular discussion shows how fiction can evoke powerful feelings about the way in which a specific religious tradition is portrayed.

Strangely, after all this discussion, I wasn’t sure if anyone I had spoken with had actually read Brother Brigham. They certainly should—and not just for reasons of academic interest. Brother Brigham is a real page-turner. The plot concerns the misadventures of one of Brigham Young’s descendants named C.H. (Corey Horace) Young, affectionately called “Cain” by his wife, Dani. C.H. works in a bookstore but feels as though life may hold greater things for him—after all, his patriarchal blessing indicates that God has reserved a special destiny for him. This special destiny seems to materialize in the form of Brigham Young’s spirit, who directs C.H. to a large sum of money mysteriously stashed in a backpack and left in some brush near the salt flats off I-80 leading to the Nevada border. The plot soon thickens, with “Brother Brigham” revealing that God wants C.H. to become the prophet, seer, and revelator of the LDS church and revive the practice of plural marriage.

C.H. decides to commit himself to this special mission, and, as directed by his noble bearded ancestor, asks Sheila, a co-worker and budding Satanist, to become his plural wife. C.H. then steals a recommend from his bishop to gain temple access for the marriage ceremony. All is seemingly going according to plan, but C.H.’s newly found commitment to polygamy begins to weaken when Brother Brigham commands him to marry Cyndy, a teenager living next door. It is then that the true identity of Brother Brigham is revealed. He is a devil from “outer darkness.” But because C.H. has become an apostate by defiling the temple, he has no power against this devil, who goes by the name “Legion.” Only the local bishop is finally able to banish the devil by invoking the name of Jesus and the full powers of the Melchizedek priesthood.

HE students in my class enjoyed the furious pacing of the book, and the general consensus was that the novel worked well simply as fiction—Mormon or otherwise. But what made the novel special was how it prompted discussion of the tensions and desires hidden just below the surface of everyday Mormon life and religious practice. Most fundamentally, Brother Brigham probes one of the central moral ambiguities of Mormonism: Is something ethical simply because God commands it?
Mormon belief in continuing revelation is intimately linked to the promise of exaltation. Exercising and receiving revelation not only bring humans into a transforming connection with the Divine but also provide a foretaste of what it is to be God. Polygamy offers a similar kind of preview of what it is like to be God in that the polygamy patriarch, like God Himself, rules over, expands, and populates his own dominion. But as the demonic “Brother Brigham” seduces C.H. into believing in his divinely ordained role, we see how revelation can be distorted and manipulated to selfish ends. The moral ambiguities of Mormonism, then, are reflections of the moral ambiguity humans so often celebrate and exploit as they give in to the temptations of sin.

While Brother Brigham might seem to revel in the most controversial aspects of the LDS tradition, it concludes with a powerful vindication of orthodox Mormonism. The local bishop banishes the demon, and LDS Family Services help C.H. and his wife Dani reconcile.

Thus the LDS Church and the Mormon community provide the surest defense against the potential excesses of Mormon doctrine and historical experience. But the novel also makes clear that this safety comes at a price. C.H.’s wife Dani agonizes over whether she will become another Emma Smith, rejecting God’s chosen prophet because of plural marriage.

As for C.H. himself, when he asks Sheila to become his plural wife, he is surprised by how much he is aroused by her freedom—a freedom expressed most evocatively in her late-night naked runs through the town. Indeed, freedom and nakedness seem to be intertwined in Brother Brigham, especially as Sheila reflects on how confining it will be to wear LDS garments to bed when she is so used to sleeping in the nude. The LDS undergarment, like the LDS tradition itself, protects but also constrains.

In discussing these thematic elements of Brother Brigham, some of my students wondered whether the entire novel is really an exercise in “conforming to evade.” In other words, they wondered whether the novel’s final conformity with current mainstream Mormon orthodoxy enables it to evade the traditional Mormon prohibition against sexuality explicit material.

Of course, “sexually explicit” is a relative term, and if Brother Brigham were made into a film, it probably would be rated only PG-13. Since such a rating would hardly deter my students, perhaps the same could be said for many Latter-day Saints. Given this, Brother Brigham seemed to my class and me to be a good novel but not necessarily a radical challenge to contemporary Mormon conventions in literature and entertainment.

After teaching Brother Brigham, I came to see the novel rather differently than I had at first. I have always ruminated over why Latter-day Saints describe themselves as a “peculiar people.” While there are many ways to interpret this phrase, I have always thought that it expresses how Mormonism is “out of sync” with the world just enough to give witness to a reality that transcends the world.

Following this line of reasoning, one might say that Brother Brigham is a “peculiarly orthodox” Mormon fantasy that pushes the boundaries of LDS tradition only to reaffirm them in the end. Of course, many non-Mormons might find the novel peculiar simply because of its Mormon content. By contrast, many Latter-day Saints might find the novel not peculiar in the least. But what everyone would probably agree on is that Brother Brigham—peculiar or not—is one heck of a good read.

NOTES

1. Indeed, in Martindale’s article, “How I Became a Mormon Nudist,” (SUNSTONE, July 2008, 44–47), he tells about how his practice of nudism has informed his spirituality.
I N THE DECEMBER 2007 column I shared “Kristen’s” story about her family’s decision to start attending church again. This is an update to her story.

KRISTEN: From October through March, we attended church pretty regularly. The children went to Primary, I went to Relief Society, and we all went to sacrament meeting.

This seemed to be a decent routine at first. But it became increasingly clear from my husband’s feeling that our attendance was a pretense, that this was going to be a tough road. Week after week, I sat in my meetings thinking to myself, “I simply don’t believe this anymore. I have a fundamentally different view of how the world works, what constitutes spirituality, and what a relationship with God is all about.” I found myself trying to block out the words being spoken during the lesson and just focus on the picture of Jesus at the front of the room.

It all came to a head on Easter Sunday. The Relief Society lesson was about “the power of the priesthood,” and then sacrament meeting was spent reorganizing the Bishopric. Hardly a mention of what Easter is supposed to be about. The Relief Society lesson was about “the role of Jesus at the front of the room.”

So my husband and I sat down and made another decision: Sunday would be devoted to family togetherness and fun times. The miracle (and I mean that) in all this is the way my husband and I have forged this path together. I know situations like this can be a disaster otherwise. Our cooperation is probably the reason the children are faring so well. They see that Mom and Dad are happy. They continue to live in a home where they feel loved, respected, and treasured. They are encouraged to seek a relationship with God, to feel awe and respect for the fact that God is all around us, ever present.

So our home life still feels “spiritually alive.” We pray at meal times and bed times. We regularly talk of God and Jesus. We are very clear with the kids that we respect all religions, including Mormons. We don’t go much further into it than that.

So far we all seem to agree that having family time is a good way to spend our Sundays. Of course, this doesn’t erase the challenges that lie ahead, such as my kids possibly being excluded or ostracized for not being “in the fold.” But I just have to believe that times are changing and that today’s religious climate is not the same as when I was growing up.

So far, my children have been surprisingly unaffected by our newly reduced church activity at present. Certainly one of them may develop stronger feelings about it in the future. I think the difference now is that we are not attending any church, while, in our earlier inactive period, we were attending a Protestant church. Historically my oldest child has had the strongest feelings on the matter. But we have come to find out that her feelings were very much driven by her friendship with the girls in her Primary class. She is now playing more with other girls in the neighborhood (from a different ward) so she no longer seems to be bothered that she might be “missing out” on Sunday.

However, I continue to serve on the Relief Society activity committee. When the presidency saw what was happening in my life, they called and asked if I wanted to be released. I said no. I see no reason not to continue in my current position of “hand-out deliverer.” (Isn’t that a great church calling?) I still go to Relief Society activities once a while.

When I imagine being an inactive Mormon somewhere outside Utah (where I would not be surrounded by family), I think I could feel quite peaceful about our latest decision. I don’t think that God cares as much about whether I am an attending Mormon as he cares about the way I live my life and if I can find peace.

But when I think about how my parents and family might feel about me, I feel very sad and anxious. I would say this feeling of anxiety is not the Spirit telling me anything; it’s simply my sense of respect for and obligation to my parents. It’s the only thing that motivates me to try to make the whole thing work and hang with Mormonism. But I don’t think the desire to please my parents will hold sway much longer. The gap between what I am supposed to believe as a Mormon and what I actually believe in my heart is just too wide.

I think my parents have an inkling which way the wind is blowing for us, though. The fact that we have not baptized our son, who is now just a few months away from his ninth birthday, is a pretty obvious indicator about where we stand. For now, we are in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” mode. This time around, I feel much less need to explain myself and my decisions to others. I feel much more that this is a personal thing and not really their business.

Maybe I’m settling in to the idea of becoming a true-to-myself adult who takes responsibility and has courage to do her own thing. It’s scary, but it feels good!

A thirty-something active Mormon, “Jacob,” is experiencing a similar “what to do next about my troubled Mormonism” decision-making process. Here are some of our email exchanges.

JACOB: One question I have concerns the dilemma of raising my kids in the Church now when I’m not so sure I believe it myself.
It just seems there are easier, simpler ways to raise a family than going through all the details of being an active Mormon. I have three kids young enough to make the change without too much disruption, but the entire family on my side and my wife's side are all active Mormons for the most part. So, because of these family issues, sometimes I think it would be easier to just remain quiet and a Mormon.

I know my parents and in-laws would freak if we were to “leave” the church. The relief I would get would be canceled out by the extreme grief we would get from family if we left. It seems like a no-win situation for me.

After years of callings that included elders quorum president, executive secretary to the bishop, Gospel Doctrine teacher, and most recently Young Men’s president, I need to do something about my doubts.

I realize I can turn down callings, but I don’t want to be “that guy” in the ward who doesn’t do callings or who doesn’t fit in. I have always felt that one of the main benefits of being Mormon is being a part of a community where I feel like I fit in and am welcome. I feel that way right now, but I know that would change if I start rejecting callings and becoming very selective in what I choose to do in church.

JEFF: You’re not alone. I would venture that 20-30% of mature active Mormons sitting in a typical U.S. ward today have faced similar concerns, approached a series of cross roads, and have chosen the “LDS” path, making adjustments to their activity and participation, as warranted and as possible.

It seems to me that the Church encourages and supports one basic form of activity and participation, which reduces the options for people like Kristen, you, and me. “Fully in,” “in and keep your concerns to yourself,” and “out” often seem like the major three options.

You might sit down with your spouse (your kids are probably too young), go over all the pros and cons of the pathways left open to you, and then decide how to proceed. But there is no hurry. Take your time. Have several sit-downs, as necessary. Then experiment, try out your chosen path(s), but be sure to give yourself the option to change your plans if what you have decided isn’t working. Again, Kristen’s experience is instructive, but your outcomes will be unique to you.

JACOB: Do you think there are bishops, stake presidents, or even General Authorities who are in the borderlands: or are closet doubters?

JEFF: Once when I was on the stake high council, a bishop whispered to me that he was basically a closet doubter, and another recently hinted at it over the phone with me. There is the old story that “Catholics in the pews believe the Eucharist is the Body of Christ, altar boys wonder if it is, and priests know it is not.” In my limited experience, that scenario occasionally applies to the lower levels of LDS leadership.

Personally, I think our high leaders are true believers. For those few who may be closet doubters, it would take much courage and selflessness for them to give up the power, influence, and prestige that comes with the territory. The rationalizations (“I can do more good here in this calling,” “It would hurt the church,” “It would devastate my family,” “It would ruin a lot of lives,” “It would destroy others’ testimonies,” “I would be seen as losing my favorable position with God,”) and the pressure to keep quiet (or not to admit to questions and doubts) would be almost overwhelming.

Of course, you and I are experiencing similar trials, though with less at stake: how to deal with the multiple and sometimes conflicting challenges of honesty and trust, doing good, fulfilling our responsibilities, and family demands.

JACOB: I have been reading your book, in which you mention that you could not be called to be a bishop, mission president, or other leader. My question is, why not? If you are an active, faithful Mormon, why couldn’t you be called to any of those positions? Have you made it clear to your leaders that you’re not a “true believer”?

JEFF: Yes, I tactfully let members and leaders know that I’m not a “true believer” but that I am a genuine supporter of and faithful to the Church, as well as a true believer in Jesus. The problem is, many don’t hear or understand the qualifier, which can cause trouble.

But being candidly honest and faithful is apparently not sufficient for being called to many positions in today’s Church. For example, the LDS Handbook of Instruction says that to be an instructor in a priesthood quorum, one must have a “strong testimony.” In my ward, I have been prohibited from teaching in my high priests group meeting. Currently I am a coordinator of the Emergency Preparation activity and a home teacher. So, from my experience, coming out and being honest does put one at risk of not having a chance to hold certain Church leadership callings.

But that can be a minor issue for most of us. I have had plenty of teaching and leadership opportunities in and out of the Church.
For example, I have served as the president of a national professional society, I’ve been a counselor in two bishoprics, and I’ve served two missions.

JACOB: What do you make of Joseph Smith? Was he a liar and con man, a delusional and confused man, a true prophet, or what? Also, how do you deal with the Book of Mormon?

JEFF: Now, these are bold questions, not often raised in polite LDS society! However, those who are curious enough to examine (not just “study”) Mormonism, those who have learned to think critically about all things in life, those who believe there are natural explanations for most things mortal, will have questions such as yours.

Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your outlook), there is no single definitive “Joseph Smith answer” for everyone because each person comes to these questions from a different direction and for different reasons.

However, here are some thoughts.

In a private conversation in the early 1980s, Leonard Arrington, the premier LDS historian of our age, told me that he was convinced that Joseph Smith was sincere in his religious work.

As for delusional and confused, we really don’t have any way of ascertaining Joseph’s mental state. If he lived today, someone might diagnose him as having some abnormal mental condition in accordance with the DMS-IV, but we just don’t have the luxury of being able to test those kinds of conjectures. However, I’m guessing that Joseph probably attributed some of his own thoughts to God’s inspiration. But, before we go pointing fingers, we should remember that we all delude ourselves to some degree. Perhaps Joseph was only as guilty as we are.

So, in the end, those who are “curious,” as you are, must decide for themselves who Joseph Smith was, who he is today, and to what extent they will take him seriously. We all have to determine what the level of God’s influence was in Joseph’s life and in our own.

As for the Book of Mormon, its historicity has certainly been a matter of great debate that has seen no clear resolution. But when considering the importance of the Book of Mormon’s historicity, I think these questions are much more helpful when it comes to living day to day:

1. How much faith and belief in Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon are you willing to accept?
2. How much credence should you give to your Mormon upbringing, the “burnings in the bosom” and “still small voices” you’ve experienced, plus any religious experiences that have suggested something to you about Joseph and the Book of Mormon?

Based on your answers to these questions and many other personal factors (spouse, family, job, history, temperament, desires, needs), you can determine how supportive and active you should be and how forthcoming you can be about your doubts.

NOTES

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

2. See FOR THOSE WHO WONDER.COM for a free download of my book For Those Who Wonder and previous Borderland columns.

Please send me your experiences from life in the Borderlands.

D. Jeff Burton, jeff@eburton.com
ARGUMENTS ARE CONTENTED

ARTICLES IN FAVOR of Proposition 8 appeared in Mormon Times, Meridian Magazine, and other LDS-related publications. In Mormon Times, popular LDS novelist Orson Scott Card wrote an article in which he referred to “dictator judges” who “do not seem to understand … that their authority extends only as far as people choose to obey them.”

“How long before married people answer the dictators thus: Regardless of law, marriage has only one definition, and any government that attempts to change it is my mortal enemy?” wrote Card. “I will act to destroy that government and bring it down, so it can be replaced with a government that will respect and support marriage, and help me raise my children in a society where they will expect to marry in their turn.”

“Biological imperatives trump laws,” Card added. “American government cannot fight against marriage and hope to endure. If the Constitution is defined in such a way as to destroy the privileged position of marriage, it is that insane Constitution, not marriage, that will die.”

Using a language more forceful than the arguments used by the Church, Meridian Magazine contributor Glen Greener wrote an article listing nine negative “consequences [that will happen] if Proposition 8 fails.” Among them, Glenn states that “churches will be sued over their tax-exempt status if they refuse to allow same-sex marriage ceremonies in their religious buildings open to the public” and that “ministers who preach against same-sex marriage will be sued for hate speech and could be fined by the government.”

As sections of Greener’s article began to circulate anonymously over the Internet under the title, “Six Consequences the Coalition Has Identified if Proposition 8 Fails,” LDS lawyer Morris A. Thurston issued a 3,700-word document critiquing the alleged consequences.

“The arguments used in ‘Six Consequences...’ are false, misleading, and based on faulty logic,” writes Thurston. “Almost every legal case alluded to is misrepresented. The passage or failure of Proposition 8 will not affect any of the scenarios
The current Canadian law on hate propaganda excludes any speech if it is spoken during a private conversation or if the person uttering the speech 'is attempting in good faith to establish by argument an opinion on a religious subject'—thus, even ministers who preach against same-sex marriages may be sued for hate speech—an alleged consequence that seems to come from a statement Apostle Dallin H. Oaks made on an August 2006 interview.

Thurston also critiques the prediction that ministers who preach against same-sex marriages may be sued for hate speech—an alleged consequence that seems to come from a statement Apostle Dallin H. Oaks made on an August 2006 interview.

“Teachers are to teach respect for marriage and committed relationships, and Proposition 8 will not change this law.”

Deseret News Relents

IN AN 11 AUGUST EVENT RECEIVING WIDE ATTENTION from the local media, national leaders of Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons expressed regret at the decision of the LDS Church to postpone a meeting previously scheduled for that day between LDS Family Services and the gay-affirming group (SUNSTONE, April 2008, 76).

“We were told that it is expected to take several months to appoint a new director,” explained David Melson, Affirmation’s senior assistant director. “It was too late to change our travel plans.”

“Taking the admonition of an earlier prophet to heart, that it is better for a thing to be underway than under consideration, we felt that the public presentation was the best means of moving the conversation forward,” Melson added. “Affirmation looks forward to meeting with whomever President Monson appoints as his representative on this issue.”

“We would like the Church to recognize the worth of our committed relationships and help correct the perception some Church members have that being gay is a disease or a defect.”

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“Being gay doesn’t automatically equate to being promiscuous,” said Olin Thomas, Affirmation’s executive director. “We would like the Church to recognize the worth of our committed relationships and help correct the perception some Church members have that being gay is a disease or a defect.”

Hours after the press conference, the LDS Church issued a statement chiding Affirmation for holding the press confer-
SUNSTONE

Medaled. LDS athletes RYAN MILLAR (indoors volleyball), RICH LAMBOURNE (indoors volleyball), NATASHA KAI (soccer), LACEY NYMEYER (4x100-meter freestyle relay), TAIRIA FLOWERS (softball), LAURA BERG (softball), and VALERIE ADAMS VILI (track and field), during the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. With the exception of Vili, who won a gold medal for New Zealand, all the medals were with the U.S. team. Additional LDS athletes represented New Zealand, Sweden, and Venezuela.

Cast. Lapsed Latter-day Saint actress KATHERINE HEIGL, 29, in a movie adaptation of Carolyn Jessop’s memoirs, Escape, which describes Jessop’s upbringing in an FLDS family and her flight from that community. According to Variety, Heigl will also produce the film. Another studio is working on a competing project, the movie adaptation of Elissa Wall’s memoirs Stolen Innocence.

Passed Over. Former Massachusetts governor MITT ROMNEY, 61, as Republican presidential candidate John McCain’s running mate. Romney, who failed to secure the presidential nomination during the Republican primaries, quickly became a strong McCain supporter and a rumored favorite for the number-two position, but McCain instead selected little-known Alaska governor, Sarah Palin. A Washington Post article describes Romney as feeling “rudely strung along” during the selection process.

Arrived. A long-awaited son, DANIEL, to Sunstone friends LES and SHANON GRIPKEY. As noted in the short biography for Less article in the December 2007 SUNSTONE they had been seeking a child to adopt for a very long time. Daniel is an answer to their prayers, and as you can tell by the picture, he’s already well on his way to becoming the next SUNSTONE editor.

People

Medaled. LDS athletes RYAN MILLAR (indoor volleyball), RICH LAMBOURNE (indoor volleyball), NATASHA KAI (soccer), LACEY NYMEYER (4x100-meter freestyle relay), TAIRIA FLOWERS (softball), LAURA BERG (softball), and VALERIE ADAMS VILI (track and field), during the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. With the exception of Vili, who won a gold medal for New Zealand, all the medals were with the U.S. team. Additional LDS athletes represented New Zealand, Sweden, and Venezuela.

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ence. “The issues surrounding same-gender attraction deserve careful attention, not public posturing,” the statement reads. “It appears from Affirmation’s actions today that it has opted for a public rather than a private exchange.”

HEYBORNE DISHONORABLY RELEASED FROM AD CAMPAIGN

MERE WEEKS AFTER LDS ACTOR KIRBY HEYBORNE appeared in a much-discussed Miller beer commercial (SUNSTONE July 2008: 14-15), his face and upper torso were expunged from the advertisements of DEARELDER.COM, a letter-delivery service for LDS missionaries. The company issued a statement saying that they have made “deliberate decisions to select advertising that is consistent with our message of missionary support, service, and values.” Kirby’s face has been on Dear Elder advertisements for the past four years. The company is now looking for a new, unsullied face.

Featured. LDS private investigator TROY DUNN, in his own cable TV show. Dunn, who is an LDS bishop and an expert at finding and reuniting missing people, is featured in The Locator, a show which debuted 6 September on the WE channel. Over the last 18 years, Dunn has helped locate more than 40,000 people. He recently sold his business to the Utah-based ANCESTRY.COM but still takes an active part in searches.

This is not the place for a full analysis of the Laban story, but I offer some questions and reflections to help us approach the Book of Mormon: First, is it possible that Nephi’s decision—or at least his rationalization—was simply wrong and that he had deluded himself about God’s approval? This very young man, already a victim of life-threatening jealousy, knew of Laban’s murderous intent for him and his brothers. When he found Laban temporarily vulnerable but still a threat to himself and his goals, which he believed were divinely inspired, he may have very naturally been tempted to take revenge. Years of reflection before he actually wrote the account may have gradually convinced him that the Lord directed him to kill Laban to obtain the plates and thus make possible the preservation of his people.

Any reading that sees Nephi as making a mistake certainly challenges conventional thinking. We want to believe that a prophet of God, even before he is called, should be above such self-delusion and that scripture should tell us only what is best to do. We do this despite the book’s own warning: “if there are faults, they are the mistakes of men.”

However, there is another possible reading of this event, the one I believe is best. It raises even more profoundly troubling questions. What if God truly did command Nephi to slay Laban? What if it was a test, like the command to Abraham to kill Isaac? What if it was designed to push Nephi to the limits of the human dilemma of obedience versus integrity and to teach him and all readers of the Book of Mormon something very troubling but still very true about the universe and the natural requirements of a saving relationship with God? What if it is to show that genuine faith ultimately requires us to go beyond what is rationally moral, even as it has been defined by God—but only when God himself requires it directly of us? And what if each reader is intentionally left to solve the dilemma on their own through a vicarious experience with the text?

Could it be that God was both teaching and helping Nephi to develop obedience—while perhaps also teaching Nephi (and us) the costs and limits of such obedience?

Like Adam and Even, Nephi had to choose which of God’s commands to violate, either of which would exact a toll of anguish. His psalm of repentance and harrowing, complex memory of the event years later demonstrate this. The experience, of course, profoundly challenged him and indeed prepared him for future tasks and further learning. Soon afterwards he was blessed to be the first among the Nephites to receive a full vision of the life and mission of the still far-future Christ and to understand Christ’s atonement, symbolized in the tree of Lehi’s dream (“It is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men” (1 Nephi 11:22). Based on that understanding, he later states unequivocally the true nature of God as revealed in Christ, who was the absolute opponent of all imitative desire, all violence, all scapegoating, in a way that seems to contradict directly his own earlier report of what an angel had told him about God.