

# Roundtable

## THE BIBLE IN THE CHURCH

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*The way the Bible is understood and used in the Church is extremely important to the personal religion of a Mormon and to his ability to converse with other men about his beliefs and values. In this Roundtable two L.D.S. scholars examine different ways the scriptures can be approached in the context of a religion which emphasizes continuing revelation and the authority of prophets, and then a young student of philosophy does a critique of their conclusions. Heber C. Snell, a former L.D.S. Institute Director and for many years a teacher of courses in the Bible at Utah State University and (presently) Weber State College, is the author of ANCIENT ISRAEL, ITS STORY AND MEANING and articles in THE IMPROVEMENT ERA. Sidney B. Sperry, Professor of Old Testament Languages and Literature at Brigham Young University, is the author of numerous books (and articles) on the scriptures, including ANCIENT RECORDS TESTIFY, THE SPIRIT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT, and the current adult lesson manual in the L.D.S. Sunday Schools. Kent Robson, who serves in his student ward Elders' Quorum presidency, is completing a Ph.D. in philosophy at Stanford University.*

### THE BIBLE IN THE CHURCH

*Heber C. Snell*

My apologia — if one is needed — for this essay may be presented and done with at once. I have been aware, as a member of the Church,<sup>1</sup> of its great resources as a moral and spiritual force and I desire, in what I write here, only to enhance them. As an interested student and teacher in the Church for many years I have also had opportunity to think about some of its needs and to try to do something about them. My effort will take the form of calling attention to certain problems (as I regard them) in the Church and their possible solution. Constructive criticism can be of service to any social or religious institution, as history has shown time and again, and I hope that my comments and suggestions in the interest of improvement may prove timely and useful.

### STATUS AND USE OF THE BIBLE IN CHURCH

The way in which scripture is regarded and interpreted by any Christian body is of the highest importance for all its members. It may mean the difference between missing and finding fundamental historical and religious truth. The Church regards itself as definitely prefigured in the Bible and as being the authoritative interpreter of it. This fact alone makes it extremely important to understand the situation in the Church with reference to this ancient scripture and the use its speakers and writers have made of it. Equally, it calls for an evaluation of these points of view.

The Church currently accepts four different volumes as Holy Scripture, three of them unknown to the modern world a century and a half ago. These three are the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. The first is an account of certain civilizations established in parts of Central and South America by Asiatic peoples of various origins, principally Israelite, the latest one destroyed *ca.* 420 A.D. The Doctrine and Covenants is a compilation of the revelations of Joseph Smith, together with two additional "sections" and a revelation to Brigham Young. The Pearl of Great Price contains four writings, one professing to be from the hand of Abraham, another claiming to be certain revelations given to Moses (but not in the Old Testament), the third a revision of Matthew 24 by Joseph Smith, and the fourth an "extract" from the Prophet's history, which includes an account of the "First Vision."<sup>2</sup>

In 1830, when the Church was organized, it had two sacred books, the Bible and the Book of Mormon, the former apparently accorded first place.<sup>3</sup> As early as 1831 a first compilation of Joseph Smith's revelations, known as the *Book of Commandments*, was accepted as scripture but because of untoward events was never printed "as such" by the Church.<sup>4</sup> The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church, a development from the earlier compilation, was so named, accepted, and published in 1835 as scripture. There have been a number of editions since, containing revelations up to 1847. The Pearl of Great Price was the latest writing to enter the L.D.S. canon of scripture, the date of its official acceptance by vote being October, 1880.

From occupying the status of the first of two books of scripture in the Church the Bible became, in the course of about two decades, one of four. There are indications that it has now declined to the position of third or even fourth place among the Church's sacred books. Certainly many among the Latter-day Saints regard it as inferior in authority to the Book of Mormon<sup>5</sup> and the Doctrine and Covenants, and some appear to subordinate it also to

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<sup>1</sup> The word Church in this essay refers to the L.D.S. Church, unless its context makes it mean otherwise. The Bible — the other noun in the title — I regard as an inspired book. The question of its inspiration is not, however, a part of my subject.

<sup>2</sup> To these writings have been added the "articles of faith" of the Church.

<sup>3</sup> One might fairly infer as much from the extensive use of the Bible in the earliest period and from its precedence in the eighth "article of faith."

<sup>4</sup> Cf. W. E. Berrett, *The Restored Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1959), p. 139.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the following statement by Joseph Smith: "I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book." *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1950), I, 461.

the Pearl of Great Price.<sup>6</sup> Whether this decline in the status of the Bible is good either for the Church as an institution or for its individual members is open to serious question.

This change of status of the Bible seems to be well attested by the relatively little attention given it by Church speakers and writers. One seldom hears from the pulpit a sermon or lecture dealing with it in an historical or analytical way. The reader needs only call to mind the sermons at quarterly and general conferences for the support of this assertion.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, the Bible is frequently quoted for the purpose of sustaining Church teaching, but such use rarely throws light on the nature and worth of the Great Book. A like neglect is observable in the literature of the Church. The writer counted thirteen articles, making a total of 41 pages, in *The Contributor*,<sup>8</sup> volumes 1 to 17, dealing in some fashion with it, as against thirty-six, a total of 267 pages, on the Book of Mormon. An examination of the *Improvement Era Master Index*, covering the years 1897-1940 inclusive, gave thirty-six titles under Bible, or 137 pages, as compared with 124 titles and 725 pages under Book of Mormon.

In view of these data, which certainly show interest trends — to claim no more for them — it is to be doubted that Sunday School outlines, Mutual Improvement Association manuals, and most of the other literature of religious education in the Church would present a picture much different. An exception should possibly be made in the case of Relief Society lessons and Seminary and Institute curricula.<sup>9</sup> These indicate a greater relative interest in the Bible, yet there are some Institutes in the Church which give no courses at all in it during certain divisions of the school year. In none of the Institutes, currently, is work in the Bible required for graduation.<sup>10</sup>

It might be argued that wide knowledge of the Bible among Latter-day Saints may be taken for granted, while the study of "modern scripture" needs to be stimulated. The point might be partially conceded in the case of converts to the Church, for these could have learned a good deal about the Bible in other churches but little or nothing about the writings peculiar to Mormonism. Converts are few in number, however, compared to native members. If it is further argued that the latter acquire, through their experience in the Church, the needed acquaintance with the Old and New Testaments, I, for one, should like to know what are the grounds for such an opinion. My work, as a teacher of the Bible in L.D.S. collegiate institutions over a period of a quarter of a century, has failed to convince me that our people have made much advancement in biblical knowledge.

As to the *formal status* of the Bible in the Church, as scripture on a level

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1958), p. 55-59; Doctrine and Covenants (ed. of 1932), Preface; *General Conference Report*, Oct., 1948, pp. 163, 164.

<sup>7</sup> Someone should do the research involved, using the sermons published over a given period. The writer is confident it would sustain in a striking way his statements in the text.

<sup>8</sup> This periodical was the official organ of the two special youth organizations of the Church from 1880 through 1896. In the following year it was succeeded by the *Improvement Era*.

<sup>9</sup> Research should be made in these several areas and the results evaluated. So far as the writer knows no serious study of the kind has been done.

<sup>10</sup> Until this year six credits in Book of Mormon have been required out of eighteen necessary for graduation.

with the Book of Mormon, this would seem to be secure as long as the eighth "article of faith" stands. This reads:

"We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God."<sup>11</sup>

Certain remarks of President George A. Smith, at a general conference of the Church within recent years, are to the same effect. He seems to the writer, however, to subordinate the Bible to the other "standard works" of the Church.<sup>12</sup> J. Reuben Clark writes that the four books "are of equal authority in the Church."<sup>13</sup> I am told that President David O. McKay holds the same view.

### EVALUATION OF THE BIBLE'S STATUS

The comparatively poor standing and neglect of the Bible in the Church may be taken, I think, as an indication of the level of its understanding and appreciation by the leaders and laity. A more impressive index may be found in the manner of its use in supporting Church doctrine and providing predictions for which fulfillments in our time are claimed. Light on the subject may be had from two sources, the current teaching and preaching in the Church and its literature.

With the aid of these sources one might deal with a number of aspects of the use of the Bible in the Church, e.g., the apparently lower estimate generally of the Old as compared with the New Testament, the well-known practice of interpreting the Bible by reference to the other sacred books, and the long-established tendency, beginning with Joseph Smith, of regarding the Church authorities as the official interpreters of the Bible. I shall deal with none of these topics, interesting as they may be. Instead, I shall go on with other aspects of my subject, of equal or greater interest, and first to a consideration of *that use of scripture which finds in it confirmation or proof of certain teachings of the Church*. This is commonly referred to among scholars as the dogmatic, or "proof-text," method.

There is nothing better, possibly, to illustrate this approach to the Bible in the Church than a letter written by Joseph Smith early in 1833 to N. E. Seaton, editor of a paper in Rochester, New York.<sup>14</sup> I quote from the letter:

The time has at last arrived when the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, has set His hand again the second time to recover the remnants of His people, which has been left from Assyria and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea, and with them to bring in the fullness of the Gentiles, and establish that covenant with them, which was promised when their sins should be taken

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<sup>11</sup> Suggestions have been made toward a revision of this "article," as it affects the Bible, in order to bring it more into line with modern knowledge, but to date no change has been made. The point merits further discussion.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *119th Semi-annual Conference Report*, pp. 163-164.

<sup>13</sup> J. R. Clark, *On the Way to Immortality and Eternal Life* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1949), p. 209.

<sup>14</sup> The name of the paper is not known. The Prophet does not state whether the letter was published at the time (*History of the Church*, I, 312).

away. See Isaiah XI; Romans XI, 25, 26, and 27; and also Jeremiah XXXI, 31, 32, and 33. (*History of the Church*, I, 313)

The Prophet goes on to show that the Jews rejected the covenant offered them by Christ, and that the Gentiles then received it but in turn proved apostate — all this in fulfillment of scripture.<sup>15</sup> Since then wickedness has grown apace,

... and *Destruction*, to the eye of the spiritual beholder, seems to be written by the finger of an invisible hand, in large capitals, upon almost everything we behold. (*History of the Church*, I, 314)

There was no deliverance for anyone, said Joseph, except through repentance and acceptance of the restored Gospel.

In connection with this message to “all people,” the Prophet adds to his interpretation of the Old Testament the testimony of the Book of Mormon, and in doing so uses more Bible references:

By it [Book of Mormon] we learn that our western tribes of Indians are descendants from that Joseph who was sold into Egypt, and that the land of America is a promised land unto them, and unto it all tribes of Israel will come, with as many of the Gentiles as shall comply with the requisitions of the new covenant. But the tribe of Judah will return to old Jerusalem. The city of Zion spoken of by David, in the one hundred and second Psalm, will be built upon the land of America, “and the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads” (Isaiah XXXV: 10); and then they will be delivered from the overflowing scourge that shall pass through the land. But Judah shall obtain deliverance at Jerusalem, Ezekiel XXXIV: 11, 12 and 13. (*History of the Church*, I, 315)

In these quotations from the Prophet’s writings there is no thought of context or other conditioning factors. What the specific references teach, to his mind, is given in general terms and then the biblical passages are cited, usually in a lump. One may be pardoned if he suspects that this is a rather loose way of handling scripture and that there may be less or more in the quotations than the interpretations suggest.

A number of years after the writing of the Seaton letter Joseph Smith wrote an account of the appearances of Moroni to him in 1823.<sup>16</sup> This messenger quoted profusely from the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. In the Prophet’s journal the quotations are cited *en bloc*:

He [Moroni] first quoted part of the third chapter of Malachi, and he quoted also the fourth or last chapter of the same prophecy, though with a little variation from the way it reads in our Bibles. . . . In addition to these, he quoted the eleventh chapter of Isaiah, saying that it was about to be fulfilled. He quoted also the third chapter of Acts, twenty-second and twenty-third verses, precisely as they stand in our New Testament. . . . He quoted the second chapter of Joel, from the twenty-eighth verse to the last. He also said that this was not yet fulfilled, but was soon to be. . . . He also quoted many other passages of Scripture, and offered many explanations which cannot be mentioned here. (*History of the Church*, I, 12, 13)

<sup>15</sup> Passages specified are Is. 24: 5; Mk. 16: 17, 18; I Cor. 12.

<sup>16</sup> It is not definitely known when the account of these visions was first written, but the earliest publication date was probably 1838. Cf. F. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Knopf Inc., 1945), p. 39.

This wholesale way of handling biblical materials seems to be in defiance of all canons of interpretation, but occasionally the Prophet became a more careful exegete, dealing with particular words and phrases of scripture. Thus in Section 77:1 of the Doctrine and Covenants, he identifies "the sea of glass" of Revelation 4:6 as "the earth, in its sanctified, immortal, and eternal state." The four beasts of the next verse are figurative expressions, he writes, "describing heaven the paradise of God, the happiness of man, and of beasts, and of creeping things and of the fowls of the air," etc. In view of the difficulty of ancient apocalyptic, this seems a bold venture in biblical interpretation. In the annotated edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, however, the editors are at great pains to justify the Prophet's explanations.<sup>17</sup>

The disciples of Joseph Smith, those who wrote and spoke on religious themes, followed in the main the pattern of biblical exegesis set by him, i.e., to quote scripture and interpret it without regard to the historical milieu in which it arose. It is the method employed later in such collections as the *Journal of Discourses*<sup>18</sup> and the semi-annual reports of Church general conferences. It has always been conspicuous in the missionary literature of the Church, such as the *Voice of Warning* by Parley P. Pratt and *Rays of Living Light* by Charles W. Penrose. It characterizes likewise the more pretentious books dealing with doctrine. Important examples of the latter, which have been in long use, are *The Gospel* by Brigham H. Roberts, and *The Articles of Faith* by James E. Talmage.<sup>19</sup> More recent books of like kind are Joseph Fielding Smith's *The Way to Perfection* and *The Progress of Man*, also Milton Hunter's *The Gospel Through the Ages*. These later volumes rely much less on the Bible than on "latter-day scripture." Numerous examples of "proof texts" and their application could be cited from them and other Church writings.

Since the expository literature of the Church uniformly employs the "proof-text" approach to scripture, it could be expected that the current teaching and preaching would follow, except in rare instances, the same pattern. Gospel tracts and books, especially prepared to win converts, are distributed today by hundreds of missionaries who in their evangelical work utilize them to "prove" the accepted theology. One will rarely hear, in a Latter-day Saint assembly for worship or instruction, any departure from the traditional method. This is true, in lesser measure, in the Seminaries and Institutes of the Church. It is as if the modern study of the Bible, through literary, historical, and archaeological approaches, had never been heard of.<sup>20</sup>

In the days of Joseph Smith — and, generally speaking, to the end of his

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. H. M. Smith and J. M. Sjodahl, *Doctrine and Covenants Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1957), pp. 471, 472.

<sup>18</sup> This is a verbatim report of general conference sermons of the Church from 1853 to 1886.

<sup>19</sup> A concession that the context of scripture should be taken into account in interpreting it occurs in a statement made by J. E. Talmage in his *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City, 1890), p. 365.

<sup>20</sup> I do not take the position that *all* scriptural passages require for their understanding one or more of these approaches. Many proverbs, psalms, moral and religious teachings, etc., have a universal character which makes them directly understandable to the reader. This fact explains in part the immense contribution the Bible has made through the centuries to human life.

century — it was hardly to be expected that Mormon theologians would utilize any approach to Bible study but the one in common use in Christian churches everywhere. The Prophet showed a good deal of independence indeed, in his own handling of scripture, and tolerated it to some extent in others,<sup>21</sup> but he never came in sight of the better methods of biblical study which we know today. Had he lived when the newer critical studies were becoming known in America — roughly the latter half of the last century — he would probably have been sympathetic with, if not an ardent student of, them. The warrant for this statement is his early absorption in learned studies, particularly Hebrew,<sup>22</sup> his recommendation to “the Saints” to study all good books, and his well-known openmindedness.<sup>23</sup>

### DANGERS IN USING THE DOGMATIC METHOD

The dogmatic method of interpreting scripture is probably the least profitable approach to it. Strictly speaking, it is not a study of scripture at all since its interest is to “prove” certain presuppositions which may bear little or no real relation to texts cited. But the supposed demonstration proceeds by seizing upon some verse, or larger section of the Bible, which is thought to support the proposition to be established. Needless to say, the supposed “proof” is always found.

A principal defect of this use of scripture is that it ignores completely the historical situation in which the texts it uses arose. It is rarely ever concerned about their date or authorship, or even the context of the quotations used. It knows nothing of the occasion of the biblical book containing them nor of its purpose. Since all these items may have an intimate bearing on the meaning of the quoted materials, ignorance of them may lead one anywhere — and generally does.

It is not necessary in this paper to write of the confusions in Christianity traceable directly to the supposed right of every man to interpret the Bible in his own way. He has the right, no doubt, under the law, but he had better go only as far as his knowledge of relevant materials warrants. In other fields of human endeavor it is taken for granted that comprehensive knowledge is needed. We rely on the lawyer to interpret the law, on the physician to prescribe for our ills, on the historian for facts of history. As for the biblical field, it is too often assumed that specialized knowledge about it counts for little or nothing at all. The claim is made, in fact, that it may actually hinder the search for truth. Conceivably it *may*. Vitiating factors *do* sometimes enter into biblical interpretation — even at the hands of scholarly men, it must be confessed — *but genuine knowledge is surely not one of them*.

The free use of the “proof-text” approach to scripture in the Church has led to a number of highly questionable interpretations of biblical materials. As I have suggested, this was quite unavoidable in the first half-century of the Church’s existence. But these interpretations need not be continued

<sup>21</sup> The case of Pelatiah Brown is an example (*History of the Church*, V. 340, 341).

<sup>22</sup> This difficult language he and others studied with enthusiasm, as early as 1836, under the tuition of “Professor Joshua Seixas,” brought from Hudson, Ohio, to Kirtland (*History of the Church*, II, 368 ff.).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. W. E. Berrett, *The Restored Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1961), pp. 135 f.

simply because they have come down from the fathers. A better method of getting at the meaning of scripture has long been available, and it is difficult to understand why Church theologians, professing as they do to welcome truth from all quarters, have not eagerly made use of it. The method has been already described in part, and I shall shortly give two extended illustrations of it to show what light it is able to throw on the responsible task of interpreting biblical writings.

Meantime a number of brief examples of questionable interpretations based on proof texts may be cited from Mormon writings. The Pratt brothers made much of the vision of Nebuchadnezzar and its ancient interpretation in Dan. 2:31-45, with which they coupled certain verses in Dan. 7. By implication, if not by direct statement, they identified the "everlasting kingdom" (Dan. 2:44; 7:27) with the Church set up in 1830 by Joseph Smith.<sup>24</sup> The Pratts have been followed in this interpretation by such prominent Mormon writers as B. H. Roberts,<sup>25</sup> J. E. Talmage,<sup>26</sup> and Joseph Fielding Smith.<sup>27</sup> J. A. Widtsoe is more cautious, saying only "that the stone that broke the image to pieces is the Kingdom of God."<sup>28</sup> The Daniel passages cited by these writers apply, not to events of the centuries since Christ but to those supposed to take place in the Second Century, B.C., and earlier.<sup>29</sup>

In frequent use by Church theologians<sup>30</sup> has been the allegory of the two "sticks" (Ezek. 37:15-20). The "sticks" have meant for them the Bible and the Book of Mormon. Ezekiel's own explanation of his allegory follows the passage immediately in verses 21-28. For him the sticks mean the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. In his view they will again be "one nation." The prophet's words in these verses are so plain that "he who runs may read" and, I may add, understand.<sup>31</sup> Numerous texts of the Bible (e.g., Is. 24:5; Amos 8:11, 12; II Tim. 4:3, 4; II Pet. 2:1-12) are said by Mormon writers to point toward the complete apostasy of the ancient Christian Church. Thorough study of such texts, taking into account their history, will usually show that they are descriptive of conditions in the writer's own time or of events which, in his view, will shortly occur. It would be difficult indeed to prove that the Bible writers had their eyes fixed on specific events to take place

<sup>24</sup> P. P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning*, etc. (Liverpool, 1909), pp. 11-16; N. B. Lundwall, *Masterful Discourses and Writings of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, no date), pp. 192-206, 258.

<sup>25</sup> *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1911), I, p. 119.

<sup>26</sup> *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1924), pp. 364-368.

<sup>27</sup> *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1950), pp. 7, 23, 24.

<sup>28</sup> *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1943), p. 61. Dr. Widtsoe has at this point some very sensible remarks on the interpretation of Daniel's prophecies.

<sup>29</sup> To present the evidence for this statement would require an essay. The reader is referred to J. Bewer, *Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), pp. 410-419.

<sup>30</sup> The two L.D.S. interpretations of scripture in this paragraph are so widely held in the Church that it seems unnecessary to give specific references.

<sup>31</sup> One writer, Edward H. Anderson, maintains that the Hebrew word for "stick" in the Ezekiel text cannot be translated by the words roll, or book, or record. He cites D. C. 27:5 in support of his view that "the stick of Ephraim" refers to the nation of which the Book of Mormon is the "record." (Quoted from an unpublished article entitled "Book of Mormon, A Record of the Stick of Ephraim.")



centuries after their own day.<sup>82</sup> If space permitted, many examples of questionable interpretations of biblical texts could be cited from Mormon writings.

In what has been said, I have had no thought or intention of calling in question Latter-day Saint beliefs as such, whether relating to future events or to doctrines. This is not my interest in this essay. *My one objective has been to question the validity of the biblical support claimed for certain theological teachings held by Church writers and so to lead to a better way of dealing with scripture in the interest of truth.* The Bible, in my view, has been too much used by Church theologians as a repository of proof texts, with little or no regard for the historical background or context of the sections cited.

### THE HISTORICAL METHOD OF BIBLE STUDY

The better way of studying scripture, that is, its approach through history, has already been referred to and partly described in this essay. Its essence is in the intent to get at the facts regarding the origin and nature of the writing being studied.<sup>83</sup> I shall now describe the method more fully and then go on to illustrate it.

Every biblical book is the product of some human mind, or minds, activated variously by the Divine Spirit and reacting to a certain environment. It follows that the more one knows about the writer and his milieu the better one is prepared to uncover the meaning of his book. It may be said, indeed, that without this knowledge the message of the ancient text will remain more or less hidden. Such specific facts as the date and provenance of the book, the identity and character of its author, his purpose in writing, contemporary ideas and movements, and special issues which the writer confronts — these are what is meant by the *historical situation*.

This fruitful method, in relation to a biblical book, may be described also from the point of view of the ancient reader, for then as now books were written to be read. What the book meant to the intelligent reader — what each incident or saying meant to him — must be taken into account so far as we possess knowledge of such matters. Thus to get an understanding of Paul's ideas about resurrection, spiritual gifts, or the Lord's Supper, it would be helpful to know what the Corinthian Saints thought about them. It would help materially, in interpreting portions of the Revelation of John if we knew what contemporary church-goers said about them after they heard the book read to the congregation (cf. Rev. 1:3). To know what the great ideas of the Gospel of John — truth, light, life, incarnation, and revelation — meant to its ancient readers and how they must have been moved by them would further immensely our understanding of this difficult scripture.

It may fairly be claimed, I think, that most of the values inherent in the several methods of studying scripture may be found in the historical

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<sup>82</sup> I cannot discuss here the problem of predictive prophecy. The reader is referred to a clarifying treatment of the whole subject of prophecy in a book by a famous Canadian scholar, R. B. Y. Scott. Pages 1-17 point out that prediction is a leading feature of the kind of prophecy known as apocalyptic but that it is also found in the sermons of the great prophets. Scott's book, *The Relevance of the Prophets* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1953), should be in every library of books on the Bible.

<sup>83</sup> In this important quest — and in the interpretation of all scripture — the illumination of the Divine Spirit is to be sought. His aid is, in my view, indispensable.

method. To use scripture to support some belief, anciently or modernly held, is legitimate enough, provided one has ascertained, if possible, what it meant to the ancient writer and reader. What a quoted passage *seems* to mean to us may be quite different from what it *actually* meant to them. By the couplet,

For out of Zion shall go forth the law  
And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem —

the ancient prophets did not mean, and were not understood to mean, two different cities but only one.<sup>84</sup> When Mark and Matthew reported that the Spirit descended "like a dove" on Jesus at his baptism, they did not visualize, in all likelihood, a real dove; they were merely utilizing, in a simile, a well-known symbol of the Spirit of God. Luke (Lu. 3:22) apparently meant a real dove.<sup>85</sup> The so-called "devotional method" of Bible study — devout reading of scripture with little attempt at analysis — has been very fruitful in bringing moral and spiritual help to readers. The danger in its exclusive use is that it falls short of a complete handling of the text while gathering up at the same time various unwarranted meanings. The study of scripture by way of its history, so far as this can be known, is prerequisite to its full understanding and enjoyment.

One could select almost at random illustrations of the historical approach to the Bible. I shall now present the two which were promised earlier in this paper, one dealing with the Book of Nahum in the Old Testament, the other with the Revelation of John in the New Testament. Both studies will be necessarily brief, but they may well serve the two-fold purpose of showing how the study of an entire biblical book should be undertaken and how the book may be grossly misunderstood when it is not placed in its historical setting.<sup>86</sup>

### THE BOOK OF NAHUM

An advantage in selecting Nahum for our first study is that it is a small book, it will be seen, affords a particularly simple and clear illustration of itself and further clarified by sources outside the Bible. The study of this book, it will be seen, affords a particularly simply and clear illustration of the historical method.

Nothing is known about the prophet Nahum except what may be gleaned from his book. Even his native town, Elkosh, has not been identified, but that he was a poet of power and skill is evident from the little book he has left us. The regret of scholars is that we have so little from his pen. His book, which has been called "a song of exultation," is wholly about Nineveh, the proud and wealthy capital of the ancient Assyrian kings. The city is named in three places in the book (1:1; 2:8; 5:7) and the entire poem is an account of its siege and downfall, the misery of its inhabitants, and the

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<sup>84</sup> The quotation comes from Is. 2:3 and Micah 4:2. It is a clear case of synonymous parallelism, in which the second line means the same as the first. Jerusalem and Zion are equivalent terms. Cf. a quotation earlier in this article, where Zion is thought of as a city to be "built upon the land of America."

<sup>85</sup> Cf. B. W. Bacon, *The Story of Jesus* (New York: The Century Company, 1927), pp. 129-171. Confirmed literalists should read and ponder these pages by one of America's foremost New Testament scholars.

<sup>86</sup> These two book studies constitute the major part of my positive argument. Their brevity is necessitated by the space accorded this essay.

exultation of the prophet at the prospect of its fall. The book was written probably about 612 B.C., the established date of Nineveh's destruction.

One must know something more about the famous Assyrian city if one would understand Nahum's prophecy. For more than two centuries Assyria had been a name to be dreaded by the little nations of western Asia, for most of them had suffered cruelly at her hands. Their tribute money had gone annually to enrich and adorn her great capital. So it came about that Nineveh's walls and palaces symbolized for them the cruelty and tyranny which had cost them treasure and blood. Any misfortune that might overtake the city and the empire would be the signal for rejoicing by all the nations which had been their victims in time of war.

A hundred years before Nahum's time the Kingdom of Israel had felt the power and vengeance of Assyria in being reduced to a vassal state. The best of her people had been exiled from their own land to become prisoners of war in the Assyrian country. Judah had escaped at the time a similar fate, but for more than a century her kings had been vassals of the kings of Nineveh.

Out of this seemingly hopeless situation the news reached Judah in the days of the "good king Josiah" that Nineveh had been surrounded by hostile armies. Her arch foes, the Babylonians and Medes, had massed their combined forces against her. A seer of Judah, probably a countryman like Amos, discerned in this event an omen of evil for "the bloody city." Yahweh had at last brought her to a time of reckoning for her sins; she would be overthrown and among the nations none would mourn her passing.

The Book of Nahum — really only a small tract — announces itself as "an oracle concerning Nineveh; the book of the vision of Nahum, of Elkosh." Yahweh is then dramatically presented as a God of power and wrath in confronting his adversaries but one who is "good to those that wait for him" (1:2-10). Coming nearer to his theme, the prophet declares Yahweh's intention toward Judah:

I have afflicted you, but I will never again afflict you.  
And now I will break his rod from upon you,  
And burst asunder your bonds. (1:2, 13)<sup>87</sup>

It was characteristic of the Hebrew prophet to think of God not only as the rewarder but also as the punisher of Israel, who often used a great nation as his instrument of chastisement. Isaiah had frequently spoken of Assyria as "the rod of his anger," and Jeremiah had referred in somewhat similar terms to Babylonia.

Nahum 2 opens with a prophetic announcement to the ill-fated Ninevites:

The shatterer has come up against you;  
Keep the rampart;  
Watch the road; brace your loins.  
Strengthen your forces to the utmost. (2:2)

The reader is presently aware that the siege of the city is being fiercely pressed (2:3-6).<sup>88</sup> As it progresses,

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<sup>87</sup> All biblical quotations from this point to the end of the article are from the *American Translation* of the Bible.

<sup>88</sup> It is these verses which have proved especially intriguing to some Mormon interpreters. They have seen in them an account of conditions in our own time, modern passenger trains

Nineveh is like a pool of water,  
Whose water escapes. (2:8)

Plundering goes on apace, for the city is rich in goods and spoil; and then —

There is emptiness, and desolation, and waste,  
And a melting heart and trembling knees. (2:10)

And the poet asks exultantly,

Where is the den of the lions,  
Where the lion tore enough prey for his cubs,  
Filling his den with prey,  
And his lair with booty? (2:11, 12)

In the closing chapter the prophet returns to a description, hardly to be surpassed, of the battle for the city (3:2, 3). Her shame is held up to public gaze (3:4-7). She is likened to Thebes, the proud city of Egypt that “went into captivity” (3:8-10). Again and again, as if he is unable to shut out the vision, the seer returns to dire prediction of Nineveh’s fate (1:11-14; 2:13; 3:5-7; 3:11-13) and to scenes of the final hours of the siege and fall (2:3-10; 3:1-4; 3:14-17). Last of all, in a sublime epitaph of the nation, he exclaims:

Your shepherds slumber, O king of Assyria;  
Your nobles sleep!  
Your people are scattered upon the hilltops,  
With none to gather them.  
There is no healing for your wound;  
Your hurt is incurable.  
Everyone who shall hear the news about you  
Will clap his hands over you.  
For against whom has your malice not continually gone  
forth? (3:18, 19)

Nahum’s prophecy must have made a profound impression in Judah, especially among those who still believed that Yahweh was a God of judgment able to accomplish his purposes in the world. From the modern believer’s standpoint it is another prophetic testimony that the God of justice will not always bear with human sin, that the course of history will vindicate the true and good and reward “those that wait for Him.”

### *THE REVELATION OF JOHN*

Our New Testament illustration of the historical approach in the study of a biblical book will present greater difficulties. The Revelation of John is a fairly large book, as biblical books go; its setting and authorship are somewhat controversial; and its character as an apocalypse makes its detailed interpretation often baffling. It is quite possible, however, to relate it to its time and to uncover its general purpose and meaning. The book will turn out to be, not a guide to events marking the end of the world — as fundamentalist exegetes have often made it — but a challenge to ancient Rome, with her paganism and hostility to the Christian Church, and a clarion call to Christians in the Empire to stand firm in their religion in spite of Rome and all her demonic works.

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running at night, canal locks, and even train conductors taking tickets. (Cf. L. A. Kelch, *A Practical Reference*, p. 14.)

The Revelation is the only book of the New Testament professing to be a message "made by Jesus Christ" to disclose the future. The author is the prophet John, a persecuted Christian, who introduces himself as being on the Island of Patmos and as hearing in a trance a loud, trumpet-like voice commanding him to write what he saw and send it to "the seven churches."<sup>39</sup>

From the prophet's own account it becomes apparent what the nature of his writing is to be, and his description is fully borne out by the character of the contents. The Revelation belongs to a class of writings called apocalypses, well known in Judaism from the Second Century B.C. They dealt usually with vision experience, real or assumed, and had to do mainly with predictions of the future. Unlike some Jewish apocalypses, which had to be sealed until the time for their fulfillment was near, the Apocalypse of John expressly warns:

"Do not seal up the words of prophecy that are in this book," he said to me, "for the time of their fulfillment is very near." (22:10)

Similar notices of the immediacy of events predicted are found at the beginning of the book (1:1, 3) and three more at the end (22:7, 12, 20).

What was the occasion for a writing of this kind? It was a critical time for the Christian Church, almost certainly the later years of the Emperor Domitian, when Rome was enforcing Caesar-worship in some parts of the Empire. For the Christians of the province of Asia resistance often meant death. Some of the more timid were giving up Christ and hastening to obey the Roman edict. In the face of such a crisis the prophet John, himself a sufferer, wrote to urge Christians not to worship "the beast," symbol of the hated Roman power whose fate was already decreed, but to prove valiant fighters for the faith and win for themselves full participation in the victory and glory of Christ, who was soon to come and put all tyranny under his feet. The book was a trumpet call to courage and faith.

John was directed by a heavenly voice to write on a scroll his visions of things to come and send it to the seven great churches of the Roman province. Letters to these churches form the prelude to the visions themselves, as the Revelation has come down to us, and contain the prophet's special messages to the churches, first as a group, afterward to each one individually. Presumably the roll of visions reached each church along with the letters, and was read — as it was intended to be — to the congregation (1:3).

The longer visions begin with Chapter 4 and conclude with 22:5. They have been given titles as follows: "The Roll of Destiny" (chs. 4-11), "The Dragon War" (12:1-19:10), and "The New Jerusalem" (19:11-22:5).<sup>40</sup> Without any attempt at detailed exegesis, I shall present briefly the content of the visions and make general comments as to their meaning. It will be seen that each vision has a definite relation to the persecution situation with which the author is concerned.

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<sup>39</sup> These are named in Rev. 1:11. Almost nothing, outside the Apocalypse, is known about the author, John. Those interested in speculation concerning him may consult M. S. Enslin, *Christian Beginnings* (Harper and Brothers, N. Y., 1938), pp. 367-372.

<sup>40</sup> E. J. Goodspeed, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), pp. 244-250.

In the first great scene<sup>41</sup> a throne appears in heaven. "In the spirit" the prophet John sees God seated upon it, surrounded by twenty-four elders, each clad in white and seated on a throne with a gold crown on his head. As part of the heavenly court are four living creatures of grotesque appearance, who never cease, day or night, to proclaim praises to God. The elders also, as they listen, fall down and worship him, casting their crowns before the Divine King and singing his praises. As the seer continues to gaze he discerns in the right hand of him who is seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. To the prophet's great sorrow no one is found in heaven worthy to open the scroll. But soon he sees "a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes." The Lamb takes the scroll, at which the four living creatures and the elders sing together a new song, proclaiming his worthiness to open it. Immediately a vast chorus of angels joins in the praise and then "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea."

As the seals of the scroll are broken one by one, terrible portents appear. At the opening of the fifth seal John sees "under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne," and he soon learns that their number is a hundred and forty-four thousand. Shortly a vast multitude, which no one could number, appears praising God and the Lamb, and the seer is told:

They are the people who come through the great persecution, who have washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb. (7:14)

Nothing will have power to hurt them any more, and "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."<sup>42</sup>

When the seventh seal is opened seven mighty angels appear, each with a trumpet ready to announce some new disaster. As the seventh angel is about to blow, the seven thunders proclaim secrets of the divine program which the seer is forbidden to write. But he is assured that at the seventh trumpet call "the mystery of God" will be fulfilled. In the interval occurs the episode of the two prophets, who in some way advance the divine program. When the seventh angel at last blows his trumpet all the woes are ended, and

The sovereignty of the world has passed into the possession of our Lord and his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.

A joyous message indeed for suffering Christians in the Empire, who believed they would share in the heavenly kingdom. The vision closes amidst a tremendous display of earthshaking forces.

In the Second Vision (12:1-19:10), the "Dragon War" in heaven forms the prelude to the conflict on earth between Rome and the Christian Church. Expelled from heaven, the Dragon, that "ancient serpent who is called the Devil and Satan," relentlessly pursues the woman who symbolizes the Church.

<sup>41</sup> Vision One, "The Roll of Destiny" (Chs. 4-11).

<sup>42</sup> The quotations in the paragraph are clear references to those who had suffered martyrdom in the Roman persecution.

Unable to destroy her, he goes off "to make war on the rest of her children — those who obey God's commands and adhere to the testimony of Jesus."

At this point the prophet John beholds "an animal come up out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads." To this animal the Dragon gives his power and throne; he is "to make war on God's people and to conquer them." A second beast, rising out of the earth, teams up with the first and works great signs to deceive mankind, "telling them to erect a statue" to the first beast and worship it (an obvious reference to Caesar-worship). To the instructed reader of the Revelation it would be quite clear that this animal symbolizes the persecuting Empire. The second beast probably represents the priesthood of the national cultus. It bears the mark or number 666.<sup>43</sup>

At this stage of the vision the "hundred and forty-four thousand" reappear, standing with the Lamb on Mt. Zion. They are the martyrs who refused to worship the beast or his image and who follow the Lamb everywhere. And now in succession three angels proclaim their messages. The first calls on men to worship the Creator of all things (in contrast to the worship of the beast), for judgment is at the door.<sup>44</sup> It is even now afoot as the second angel announces the fall of "mighty Babylon" (Rome). The third angel declares that whoever worships the animal and its statue is fated for eternal torment with fire and brimstone. In sharp contrast are those who die as Christians, for they shall rest from their labors and receive their eternal reward.<sup>45</sup>

Following this interlude "one like a son of man" appears with a sickle to reap the earth; he is ably seconded by an angel. As John looks again he sees seven angels, armed with seven plagues which they are commanded to pour out upon the earth. They are fearful plagues, penal in character, because men have lost the power to repent. The seventh plague climaxes them all, falling upon great Babylon to make her "drain the cup of the fury of his wrath."

The alert reader of the Revelation will not miss the emphasis on the city's fall and its significance. More than two whole chapters make it plain that "great Babylon" is none other than the imperial city Rome, "drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus." The mystery of her identity is completely solved when she is pictured as a harlot sitting on the seven heads of the "scarlet beast." These, says the writer, are seven hills and also seven kings, "five have fallen, one is reigning, the other has not yet come, and when he does his stay must be brief." Any modern commentary will trace these and other details of Chapter 17 back to their historical equivalents. With other evidences the book affords, they point unmistakably

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<sup>43</sup> "The number 666 in Aramaic letters could mean Nero Caesar, and probably veils a still deeper allusion to Domitian, whom the Church was indeed finding a second Nero, a Nero come to life again." E. J. Goodspeed, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), p. 247.

<sup>44</sup> Almost every L.D.S. theologian sees in the message of this angel a clear reference to the "restoration of the Gospel" through Joseph Smith. Such an interpretation ignores the plain fact that the Revelation describes events which the writer declares would soon come to pass (Rev. 1:1; 22:20; *passim*).

<sup>45</sup> This sentence expresses one of the prominent motifs of the *Apocalypse*, the glorious destiny of those who resist emperor-worship and "die for the faith."

to the reign of Domitian as the time of the persecution and to ancient Rome as "the great city."

Chapter 18 describes the holocaust accompanying the destruction of the city. Voices from heaven make declaration of her multitudinous sins, while men who have profited by her, merchants, "shipmasters and sea-faring men," and "kings of the earth," stand awestruck when they behold the smoke of her burning. And they cry out —

Alas! Alas, for the great city . . . For in a single hour  
she has been destroyed!

The third and closing vision (19:11-22:5) opens around the throne of God. A white horse appears, its rider called "Faithful and True," also the "Word of God." He leads the armies of heaven against the hosts of evil and conquers them. The beast and the false prophet, who has deceived by signs "those who had let the animal's mark be put on them and who worshiped its statue," are thrown alive into the burning lake while the bodies of the others, who had been killed by the rider of the white horse, are eaten by the birds which had gathered for "the great supper of God." The Dragon, "who is the Devil and Satan," is seized, chained and thrown into the bottomless pit, where he is doomed to remain a thousand years.

The hosts of evil disposed of, at least for the time, the millennial reign of Christ begins. The subjects of his kingdom are the martyrs in the great persecution of the Church:

And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded on  
account of the testimony of Jesus and the message of  
God, who refused to worship the animal and its statue.  
. . . They were restored to life and reigned with the  
Christ a thousand years. (20:4)

At the end of the thousand years Satan is loosed for a little season. He gathers the hosts of Gog and Magog for a final stand, but fire from heaven consumes them. The devil is thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, there with the beast and the false prophet to be tortured day and night forever.

The universal judgment from the great white throne is next set in motion, and the dead, great and small, are judged out of the book of their deeds and the book of life. These are the dead that have no part in the first resurrection and the millennial reign. As the climactic act of the great judgment, Death and Hades are cast into the lake of fire along with all whose names were not found in the book of life.

The final scenes of this third vision are a worthy climax to all that John the prophet saw. A new heaven and a new earth appear and, descending from heaven, the new Jerusalem. Simultaneously, a voice from the heavenly throne cries out:

See! God's dwelling is with men, and he will live with  
them. They will be his people and God himself will be  
with them, and he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
There will be no death any longer, nor any grief or cry-  
ing or pain. The old order has passed away. (21:3, 4)

The descending city is described as "having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel," with no need of sun or moon to shine upon it because "the Lamb" will be its lamp and God its sufficient light. Religious



ecstasy could hardly picture a more exalted scene. It is the high point of the entire apocalypse.

The epilogue of the book (22:6-21) is in a lower key, adding little that has not already been said. To one point, however, it gives great stress, the nearness of the Second Coming (22:7, 20). Curiously, this is the point which those who would make the Revelation a guide-book to the future of the present world conveniently forget.

The Revelation met a great need, the need for assurance that God would not desert his own in their world of peril; instead he would save them with a great salvation. Its symbolism, often most extravagant, conveyed to the persecuted Christian Church a sense of its great danger, yet of its final triumph. At the same time the book concealed from the enemies of the Church the message of defiance it carried. Because of its character as an apocalypse the Revelation has been much misinterpreted, yet its setting, purpose, and general meaning are well known. For this we have to thank those interpreters who have understood and utilized the historical method in studying it.

#### *SUGGESTIONS TOWARD IMPROVEMENT*

I come now to the closing section of this study. Here I shall discuss certain implications of what I have written regarding the Bible in the Church. I shall also make some criticisms and suggestions of a general character which are intended to be constructive.

Why do Church writers continue to use an inferior approach to the study of the Bible when a better one is available? This question cannot be side-stepped. It is not enough to appeal to the past and to sanctify its interpretations. It must be asked always whether these are true in the light of known facts and clearer thinking. If they are not true there should be no hesitancy in modifying or discarding them in the interest of advancement. It should be likewise with the methods of Bible study.

So far as this writer knows, the first Latter-day Saint teacher to make any extended use of the historical method in teaching the Bible was William H. Chamberlin. It was toward the end of the first decade of this century. Professor Chamberlin, who had received biblical training at the University of Chicago, was called to the Brigham Young University to teach ancient languages, philosophy, and religion. After a distinguished service of several years, opposition to his teachings discouraged him and he resigned. The chief complaint against him centered in his use of the so-called "higher criticism" of the Bible. (Incidentally the term "higher criticism" is a grossly misunderstood designation of one legitimate field of study of ancient texts.) Professor Chamberlin's leaving the University was generally regretted by faculty and students.<sup>46</sup>

Beginning in 1929, a series of summer schools at the Church University featured the presence each year of an eminent scholar brought from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. Dr. Joseph F. Merrill was then

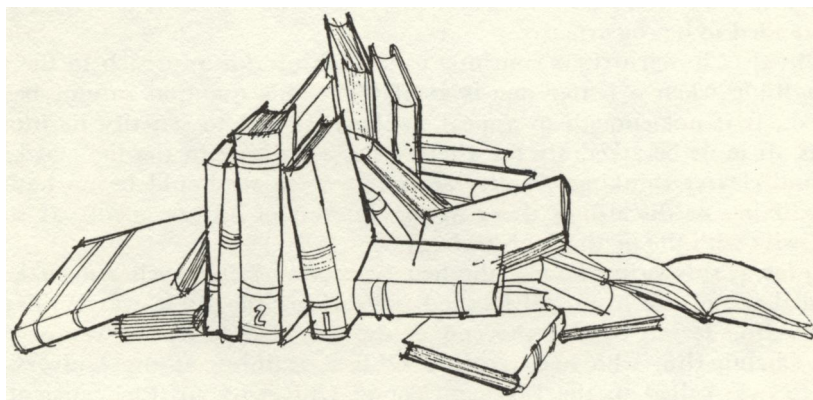
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<sup>46</sup> The year 1911 was eventful at the "Y." Three other professors, Ralph V. Chamberlin, Joseph Peterson, and Henry Peterson, well trained in their respective fields of study, found it advisable to sever relations with the institution. Complaints against them had basically to do with their supposed religious unorthodoxy.

Church Commissioner of Education and is entitled to credit, along with others, for setting up such a program. Courses in religion were taught by these scholars, among others the Old Testament by William C. Graham and New Testament by Edgar J. Goodspeed. Church seminary teachers were required, during the first two or three years, to be in attendance. But opposition arose and the project was abandoned.

To bring the best biblical scholarship to the aid of Church education was a noble experiment which, many thought, came to an end too soon. Whether the first Prophet of the Church, had he lived in our day of fresh discoveries and new insights in relation to the Bible, would have continued it, is, of course, a speculative question. I, for one, believe that he would have done so.

Fundamentalism in Protestant Christianity finds its chief support in the literal interpretation of the Bible.<sup>47</sup> Early in its history the L.D.S. Church added as scripture three other books claiming equal or greater inspiration and authority, which are, like the Bible, "taken as they read." They are taken this way because they are believed to be literally the word of God. The Church makes an exception in the case of the Bible: this is the divine word only "as far as it is translated correctly."



To take scripture as it reads seems to mean for the fundamentalist to take it as factual or "as every word true." No person acquainted in the least with the history of the Bible manuscripts, and with the fact that there are sometimes wide differences between them, could assume such a position in relation to the Great Book. This attitude toward scripture even ignores the differences between prose and poetry. For it, the book of Job has to be genuine history, the prophet Jonah must in fact be "swallowed by a whale," the sun actually stood still at Joshua's bidding, etc. The heaviest indictment

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<sup>47</sup> Two good books which deal with a better kind of biblical interpretation are J. P. Smyth, *How God Inspired the Bible* (New York: James Pott and Co., 1918), and H. E. Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1934).

against this fundamentalist position, however, is to be found in the fact that human beings wrote the books of the Bible and made, as a rule, no claim that their writings were inspired, to say nothing of a claim to infallibility.

Mormons readily admit that the Bible may contain errors due to mis-translation, but refuse, usually, to see error of any kind in the other standard works. If one is pointed out, they are likely to insist that there is no error and that they "take the word of the Lord before the word of man."<sup>48</sup> The sufficient reply to such an assertion is that every intelligent person does this *when he is able to identify the divine word*. Certain criteria have to be employed to discriminate between man's word and God's word. It is very unanalytical to say that every word of scripture is the word of the Lord. The Bible itself refers to the possibility that even a prophet may speak "presumptuously" (Deut. 18:20-22), and Jeremiah 28 provides a glaring example of one who did.

The most I can hope for, as I come to the concluding pages of this writing, is that some who read it may be stimulated to work for better things. The Church possesses, in its active membership and especially in its youth, a great force for righteousness. The Seminaries and Institutes have in them many devoted teachers who would like to lead their students into the treasures of the Bible, but these teachers have had little training in the better ways of studying it. This is certainly not a desirable situation — and it ought to be changed.

To effect such a change requires, at the very outset, that vital teachings which the Church has propounded from the beginning be honestly followed. Incentives toward such teaching may be seen in these aphorisms: "The glory of God is intelligence," "A man is saved no faster than he gains knowledge," and "Seek wisdom out of the best books."<sup>49</sup> Complete freedom of discussion in Church groups, and unhampered research in educational institutions, should be encouraged, even in fields where there is the possibility of running into conflict with theological beliefs.

Those who bear responsibility for teaching the Bible in the Church, if they are inclined to underrate the observations I have made, might take a leaf from the history of Joseph Smith. He was very much of an individualist, as a number of his sayings and incidents in his life make clear. One of the latter, too little known, concerns an attempt made by one Pelatiah Brown, previously referred to in this essay, to interpret a difficult section of scripture. It appears that Elder Brown had been industriously working at the symbolism of portions of the Revelation and had produced interpretations which were so objectionable to some that he had been brought before the high council for trial. Hearing of the affair the Prophet, in a conference sermon, commented:

I did not like the old man being called up for erring in doctrine. It looks too much like the Methodists and not like the Latter-day Saints. Methodists have creeds which a man must believe or be asked out of their church. I want the liberty of thinking and believing

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<sup>48</sup> This very remark was once made in the writer's presence by a member of an important Church committee, incidentally a man with a Ph.D. in history.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Doctrine and Covenants, Section 88:77-80, 118, and the excellent comments on these passages in the *D. C. Commentary*, pp. 555 f. and 564.

as I please. . . . The high council undertook to censure and correct Elder Brown, because of his teachings in relation to the beasts. Whether they actually corrected him or not, I am a little doubtful, but don't care.<sup>50</sup>

In conclusion I should like to reiterate what I said at the beginning of this essay. The Church has within its history and teachings much that has made it a dynamic force for righteousness and spirituality. This could be accentuated, in my opinion, by a more liberal policy in the area of biblical study and in the ways I have suggested. In providing for more freedom and more opportunity for discussion of biblical and religious matters generally, the Church would not be departing from its fundamental teachings. Instead it would be adhering more closely to them.

To justify its existence at all, any church must take as its supreme goal the ideal and practice of the *truth*. Great truths — whether of science or religion — should be available to all who seek them. If it means anything at all, “free agency,” insisted upon by the Church, means freedom to think and to act. *In no quest is freedom more to be desired than in the pursuit of the truth of scripture, for here we confront God in his supreme revelation.*

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<sup>50</sup> *History of the Church*, V, 340, 341.

## SCHOLARS AND PROPHETS

*Sidney B. Sperry*

Professor Snell's article, “The Bible in the Church,” leaves me with very mixed feelings. On the first page of his essay he implies that his criticisms are intended to be constructive and that he seeks only to enhance the great resources of the Church as a moral and spiritual force. But I get the unpleasant feeling that Professor Snell really looks upon the Church as a great social institution and denies the divine keys of authority that it claims rest in its prophets, seers, and revelators.

Later Snell discusses Joseph Smith's letter to N. E. Seaton, in which the Prophet is alleged to use the dogmatic or “proof-text” method in his explanations. Snell then concludes:

In these quotations from the Prophet's writings there is no thought of context or other conditioning factors. What the specific references teach, to his mind, is given in general terms and then the biblical passages are cited, usually in a lump. One may be pardoned if he suspects that this is a rather loose way of handling scripture and that there may be less or more in the quotations than the interpretations suggest.

Here is a scholar “telling off” the Prophet, who really understood the scriptures. I say this because I happen to believe that Joseph Smith knew the Bible and its meaning better than anyone in our era.

Later on in his essay, Snell quotes from the Prophet's description of Moroni's visit, during which the ancient Nephite prophet quoted from the books of Malachi, Isaiah, Acts, Joel, and other scriptures. Then he criticizes the Prophet's account in these words: