

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.⁵⁰

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.*

⁵⁰ *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:

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.* (italics mine)

Professor Snell's irony does not set well with me, nor will it, I'm sure, with all Latter-day Saints who believe in the divine mission of Joseph Smith. Here is another case of the scholar "telling off" the Prophet.

A page later Snell speaks of the Prophet's independence in handling scripture and of his toleration, "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." From these words I get the impression that Professor Snell is more in sympathy with the views of modern scholarship than he is with those expressed by the Prophet. Though I agree with Snell that the Prophet was openminded, I cannot agree that Joseph Smith would now concur with the scholarship of modern higher criticism, which, for example, denies the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and which disavows Isaiah's authorship of much of the book that goes under his name. For the Prophet to do so would mean that he would have to turn his back on large areas of the Book of Mormon which agree that Moses did write the Pentateuch and that Isaiah wrote many chapters in his book now denied to him by modern higher criticism. Not only does this Nephite record say that the Brass Plates in father Lehi's possession contained "the five books of Moses" (1 Nephi 5:11), but it even has the resurrected Savior quote Deuteronomy 18:15, 18, 19 as coming from Moses (3 Nephi 20:23). The implication that Moses had anything to do with Deuteronomy would not set well with most higher critics. And as for the Book of Mormon attitude toward the authorship of Isaiah one need only examine 2 Nephi 11:2, 8; 12:24; 3 Nephi 22; 23:1-3. It will be noticed that the Savior himself points out that Isaiah 54 came from the mouth of the great eighth century prophet. How many modern higher critics would accept this view? And it may be pointed out that if Joseph Smith had been sympathetic with what are now "critical" views of the Book of Genesis, he would have had to throw out all of the Book of Ether in the Nephite record, because it is dependent upon the Tower of Babel episode. In view of these facts, is it very likely that the Prophet would be sympathetic with Snell's "better methods of biblical study?" And how could Joseph Smith accept the results of these methods and consistently say that the Book of Mormon was the "most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion?"

But Professor Snell seems to go along with the modern "critical" views of the Bible which are so often in direct disagreement with the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price. How he can do this and believe in Joseph

Smith's divine mission is beyond me. And how Snell can so blithely disregard the careful studies of many conservative Bible scholars, both Catholic and Protestant, is to be wondered at. I have reference to such scholars as W. H. Green, E. J. Young, E. J. Kissane, J. E. Steinmueller, James Orr, and G. Vos.

Professor Snell's tendency to ignore the inspiration of the Prophet Joseph Smith is again illustrated when he discusses the Spirit which descended "like a dove" as reported in Matthew and Mark. Why didn't he refer to the Prophet's explanation of the sign of the dove (*Documentary History of the Church*, V. 261) as well as send the reader, via footnote, to a modern scholar? How does Snell know that Professor Bacon's explanation is any better than our great modern Prophet's? "Confirmed literalists should read and ponder these pages by one of America's foremost New Testament scholars [Bacon]," says Snell. At any rate, the Prophet's explanation is avoided and the scholar's accepted.

When Professor Snell discusses the Revelation of John in his essay, he clearly manifests his aversion to the Prophet Joseph Smith's inspiration concerning the authorship and meaning of the Apocalypse. The revelation in Section 77 of the Doctrine and Covenants is here completely ignored, as are comments of the Prophet elsewhere pertaining to the Book of Revelation. I think that I have shown sufficient reason for the feelings expressed in the first paragraph of this review. I feel genuinely sorry that Professor Snell's great talents haven't been turned in what, to me, would be a more fruitful direction. Now let us turn to his discussion of the status and use of the Bible in the Church.

Professor Snell contends that the Bible has declined in favor in the Church from first place to third or possibly even the fourth place among our sacred books. As evidence that the Bible became inferior in authority to the Book of Mormon the following statement of Joseph Smith is cited:

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.

Joseph Smith had reason to know the correctness of the text of the Book of Mormon because he had translated it, giving us a text one generation from the original. The Prophet's work on the Bible by the spirit of revelation, however, led him to say, "I believe the Bible as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers. Ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors" (*D.H.C.*, VI, 57). And the Prophet had good reason to designate the Book of Mormon as the "keystone of our religion" because of its uniqueness as a voice of warning to this generation from ancient American peoples and as a special witness that Jesus is the Christ. Not only that, but notice in a revelation to Joseph Smith that the Lord speaks of the Nephite record as "my word to the Gentile, that soon it may go to the Jew, of whom the Lamanites are a remnant, that they may believe the gospel, and look not for a Messiah to come who has already come" (Doctrine and Covenants 19:27). For this generation at least, the Book of Mormon had functions to fill which the Bible couldn't. No wonder it was to function as the "keystone of our religion." The following words of the Prophet may also help us to understand his point of view:

Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations, and where is our religion? We have none; for without Zion, and a place of deliverance, we must fall; because the time is near when the sun will be darkened, and the moon turn to blood, and the stars fall from heaven, and the earth reel to and fro. Then, if this is the case, and if we are not sanctified and gathered to the places God has appointed, with all our former professions *and our great love for the Bible*, we must fall; we cannot stand; we cannot be saved; for God will gather out his Saints from the Gentiles, and then comes desolation and destruction, and none can escape except the pure in heart who are gathered. (D.H.C., II, 52; italics mine.)

Joseph Smith never did attempt to downgrade the authority of the Bible, but he clearly recognized its weaknesses, as we have already pointed out. Now let us point out his positive efforts to upgrade its authority and show his great love and affection for it.

Between the years 1830 and 1833 the Prophet, at the Lord's command, made a revision of the Bible by the spirit of revelation. This resulted in his putting a tremendous amount of labor into the project. Although it was never fully completed in Joseph Smith's lifetime, the result of his labors can be seen in *Holy Scriptures* as published by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Whatever Professor Snell may think of the Prophet's work, he cannot deny his sincere intent to present the books of the Bible in their original purity, thus enhancing their authority.

Additional evidence is the numerous references to the Old and to the New Testament in the first six volumes of the *Documentary History of The Church*. The great number of citations from the Bible and the many explanations offered by the Prophet must impress every reader with his interest in it. Let me present one good illustration of this at this point. In a sermon on the purpose of existence the Prophet says:

But this life is not all, the voice of *reason*, the language of *inspiration*, and the Spirit of the living God, our creator, teaches us, *as we hold the record of truth in our hands*, that this is not the case, that this is not so; for, the heavens declare the glory of a God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork [Ps. 19:1]; and a moments reflection is sufficient to teach every man of common intelligence, that all these are not the mere productions of *chance*, nor could they be supported by any power less than an Almighty hand; and He that can mark the power of Omnipotence, inscribed upon the heavens *can also see God's own handwriting in the sacred volume [Bible]*: *and he who reads it oftenest will like it best, and he who is acquainted with it, will know the hand wherever he can see it; and when once discovered, it will not only receive an acknowledgment, but an obedience to all its heavenly precepts.* (D.H.C., II, 14; continuous italics mine.)

I submit that here the Prophet pays a notable tribute to the Bible.

Professor Snell cites President Joseph Fielding Smith as subordinating the Bible to the Pearl of Great Price. He points to *The Way to Perfection*, pp. 55-59, as evidence of this. I have taken the trouble of looking over these pages several times, but I certainly question Snell's logic in using President Smith's material for the purpose he does. President Smith is discussing the first revelation of the Gospel plan and uses Pearl of Great Price texts at some length because they give facts not at present found in the Bible. Here is

President Smith's own explanation for what he does at the bottom of page 55 and the top of page 56, and what he says there applies substantially to what follows in pages 57-59:

After Adam had been driven out of the Garden of Eden and was shut out of the presence of the Lord, angels were sent to him to reveal the plan of redemption. *Unfortunately our Bible, as we have it today, is very deficient in the statement of this fact. Happily the account as it was originally written by Moses has been revealed to us in the Pearl of Great Price.* (italics mine)

Is President Smith to be blamed for subordinating the authority of the Bible simply because he can't find it in the information that he needs? He clearly implies that such information was once part of the sacred volume. As a member of the Church, Professor Snell ought to rejoice that President Smith could turn to scripture containing the needed facts.

Now may I give at least one important suggestion which may help explain why Professor Snell found so many more printed pages in *The Contributor* and the *Improvement Era* dealing with the Book of Mormon than with the Bible. Ever since its publication in 1830 the Book of Mormon has been the butt of invective and ridicule from ever so many critics. Because of this fact, our Church writers have not been slow to defend the distinctive Nephite record. Numerous articles and books about the Book of Mormon have poured from the presses as a result; the end is not in sight.

Professor Snell complains about the "relatively little attention" given the Bible by Church speakers and writers. But the very genius of our Church consists in having modern prophets, seers, and revelators to meet modern needs, just as the ancient prophets, seers, and revelators mentioned in the Bible met the needs of their time. Ours is a living, not just a "Bible" Church. In our Church the nature and worth of the Bible is more generally dealt with in the classroom than in the pulpit.

Out of curiosity concerning the time and attention the Sunday Schools of the Church have paid to the Bible during the past thirty years or more, I prevailed upon my good friend H. George Bickerstaff of the Deseret Sunday School Union staff, to prepare some statistics on the topic. He and his assistants furnished many data, but space prevents me from setting forth any but a sampling from them:

A. BEFORE MANUALS WERE NAMED

Primary Department

- 1929, 1932, 1935, 1938 — all lessons on Old Testament
- 1931, 1934, 1937, 1940 — all lessons on New Testament
- 1930, 1933, 1936, 1939 — all lessons on either OT or NT
- 1942 — mostly on NT or OT themes or personalities
- 1943 — about half on NT or OT themes or personalities
- 1944 — about 37 out of 52 on NT or OT themes or personalities
- 1945 — about 26 out of 52 on NT or OT themes or personalities

Old Testament Department

- 1928-1934, 1936, 1937, 1939, 1940 — all lessons on OT with a few lessons on NT included in 1932

New Testament Department

- 1928-1933, 1935, 1936, 1938, 1939 — all lessons on New Testament

Senior Department

1942, 1944 — about 14 out of 44 on OT or NT themes or personalities

Gospel Doctrine Department

1935 — all lessons about Jesus. All except a few were based on NT

1936 — all lessons on New Testament

1945 — all lessons on Old Testament

B. NAMED COURSES

Junior Department/ Course 10

"The Life of Christ," by Kenneth S. Bennion — all lessons on New Testament

1947, 1949, 1951, 1954, 1956, 1958, 1960, 1962, 1964, 1966.

Advanced Junior Department/Course 12

"The Church of Jesus Christ in Ancient Times," by Lowell L. Bennion — 25 lessons

out of 42 on New Testament, 1951, 1952, 1956, 1958, 1960, 1962, 1964, 1966.

Gospel Message Department/Courses 16, 17

"Good Tidings To All People," by Carl F. Eyring — 6 lessons out of 48 on

New Testament, 1947, 1951, 1953, 1956.

"Christ's Ideals For Living," by Obert C. Tanner — based on Christ's

attributes as in New Testament, 1955, 1958, 1962, 1966.

Gospel Doctrine Department/Courses 26, 27

"The Synoptic Gospels," by Russell B. Swensen —all New Testament, 1945.

"The Gospel of John," by Russell B. Swensen — all New Testament, 1946.

"The Acts and the Epistles," by Russell B. Swensen — all New Testament,

1947, 1956.

"Teachings of the Old Testament," by Alvah Fitzgerald — all Old Testament, 1953.

"Teachings of the New Testament," by Lowell L. Bennion — all New Testament,

1954, 1961.

"Teachings of the Old Testament," by Ellis T. Rasmussen — all Old Testament,

1965.

"Old Testament Prophets," by Sidney B. Sperry — all Old Testament, 1966.

It is obvious that the Sunday Schools of the Church have not exactly been avoiding the Bible. But Snell is unfair to the Church when he refers in such an offhand manner to the part played by the Sunday School, the Mutual Improvement Association, the Relief Society, the Seminaries and the Institutes in promoting Bible knowledge. (Note also our Church colleges and Brigham Young University.) These are the very organizations in which so many thousands of our people are getting training in the Bible. I see no reason why Snell should be so pessimistic about the advancement of our people in Bible knowledge. Never in my long experience in teaching the Bible in our Church Schools (44 years) have I felt so optimistic. Never in the history of our Church have we had so many trained teachers to instruct our young people. Never in our history have we had so many experts to instruct potential teachers in the Bible, not to mention our other scriptures. From my vantage point at Brigham Young University I have been able to see the tremendous advancement we have made as a people over the last thirty-five years. To be sure, we have a long way to go, but let us keep in mind that our Church in this dispensation is still young (1830-1967). We have gone through a long, difficult pioneer period, but rapid changes are now being made in our Bible knowledge, thanks to the great changes in our Church School system.

Relative to Professor Snell's comments on the Bible being subordinated

to our other scriptures, may I say that never in all my contacts with the General Authorities have I ever found any of them consciously subordinating the Bible to the Book of Mormon or to any of the other standard works. If they think anything like I do, they see a profound unity of thought and spirit pervading the four standard works. No wonder, then, that President J. Reuben Clark and President David O. McKay may look upon them as of "equal authority in the Church." Why not leave it that way?

Now let us turn for a brief look at Snell's complaints about the use of the dogmatic or "proof-text" method in the Church. By this he means "that use of the scripture which finds in it confirmation or proof of certain teachings of the Church." In discussing the use of the proof-text method, Snell claims that his "*one objective has been to question the validity of the Biblical support claimed for certain theological teachings by our Church writers and so to lead to a better way of dealing with scripture in the interest of truth.*"

As pointed out earlier, Snell criticizes the Prophet Joseph Smith's methods of interpreting scripture. He speaks of the Prophet's errors, such as "no thought of context," "rather loose way of handling scripture," "defiance of all canons of interpretation," and the like. Then he cites similar patterns of biblical exegesis by other Church Authorities, such as Parley P. Pratt, Charles W. Penrose, B. H. Roberts, James E. Talmage, Joseph Fielding Smith, and Milton R. Hunter. To these he might have added a lot of lesser lights, including yours truly. And it might be surprising to some people to know that he could have turned to the New Testament and have added a number of very familiar names to the list, including the Savior himself. No, I'm not being facetious. The "proof-text" approach to scripture was used anciently by Jesus and his Apostles. Let me give a few examples. When Matthew tells about the return of Joseph and Mary from Egypt with the child Jesus, he indicates that it is in fulfillment of Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt did I call my son" (see Matt. 2:14-15). And in the same chapter (verses 16-18) Matthew asserts that Herod's slaying of the male children in Bethlehem is in fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy. "A voice was heard in Rama," etc. (31-15). Even a third case in the same chapter (verse 23) might be made out in which Matthew says that Jesus was to be "called a Nazarene" as "spoken through the prophets." In this case, Matthew does not name the prophets. Long after Jesus had turned out the money changers from the temple, his disciples remembered that the act of their Lord was in fulfillment of Psalm 69:9, "Zeal for thy house shall eat me up" (see John 2:13-17). When Jesus said that John the Baptist was the "messenger" spoken of by Malachi he might be said to have been using the "proof-text" method in interpreting the scripture (Matt. 11:10; cf. Mal. 3:1). Indeed, most Jewish scholars, not to mention some Christian scholars, might claim that our Lord was misusing the text in Malachi. They might say the same of the use of Isaiah 61:1-2 when he preached in the synagogue at Nazareth, his home town (Luke 4:16-19). And so I could multiply cases of the use of the "proof-text" method in the New Testament.

Now, why do I cite these cases of the use of the "proof-text" method in the New Testament? First, because in spite of our occasional errors, we are in the company of men who made scripture and, what is more important, we have faith in the guidance of two great spiritual leaders, Jesus the Christ and Joseph Smith his prophet. The apostles of our Lord and his other dis-

ciples were taught the Gospel under his direction and by the power of the Holy Ghost which came upon them. Later they recognized the true meaning of the scriptures. When Joseph Smith interpreted the scriptures he was able to do so because he had been under the tutelage of heavenly messengers and was also given the power of revelation through the Holy Ghost. Had Joseph Smith been confined to the methods of the Bible scholars of his day, how weak and pitiful would his contribution have been to our knowledge of scripture! Joseph Smith as a real prophet could understand prophecy. He gave us leads which we can exploit by study and by the power of the Holy Spirit. He taught as one "having authority from God, and not as having authority from the Scribes" (cf. Matt. 7:37, "Inspired" revision of the Bible). A historian cannot take the place of a true prophet, valuable as his labors may be in their own way.

I agree perfectly with Professor Snell that the "proof-text" approach in the Church "has led to a number of highly questionable interpretations of biblical materials," but I certainly cannot always agree with his examples. The use of the "proof-text" method in the Church is valuable for one reason because it can be checked and governed by living prophets and seers who, through reflection and by the spirit of their calling, may be able to detect the truth or error of its use under given situations. The method may also be checked in many instances by the Book of Mormon, The Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. These scriptures, given by a modern prophet, often throw additional light on biblical texts, and have the same spirit pervading them as does the Jewish scripture. I emphasize the fact that the "proof-text" method or any other method of interpreting scripture has to be accompanied by the spirit of revelation or it may be found faulty. If a scholar in the Church has technical training in bible languages and in other relevant techniques he has a great advantage, but he must also accompany this advantage with a good knowledge of the Gospel and pray for the Holy Spirit to guide him, or he may find himself ineffective. Let me illustrate how some of our young elders in the Church have used the "proof-text" method wrongly, sincere though they may have been. One of the doctrines of our Church is that God the Father has a glorified, resurrected body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's (D. & C. 130:22). Many brethren used Genesis 18:2-8 as a passage to illustrate this truth to prospective converts, because the Lord (so they thought) ate of the meat and cakes provided by Abraham. Only a being like man could eat of the solid food, so they reasoned. Many years ago Dr. James E. Talmage of the Twelve called me into his office and asked what I thought of this common interpretation given by our elders to the Genesis passage. I frankly told him that I disagreed with it, giving my reasons why. In the first place, the whole of Genesis 18 has provided difficulties to Hebrew scholars and should be interpreted with caution. As an illustration of this fact let me quote a recent commentator:

The relation of the three men to the Lord (v. 1) is difficult. All three *angels* (19.1) may represent the Lord (see 16.7n.); thus the plurality becomes a single person in vv. 10, 13. On the other hand, v. 22 and 19 suggest that the Lord is one of the three, the other two being his attendants.

In the second place, the Hebrew word for Lord in Genesis 18:1 is different from that for "lord" in verse 3, which may simply be a sign of greeting

equivalent to "Sir"; and, interestingly, Joseph Smith in his "Inspired" revision has Abraham say to the three men "My brethren" instead of "My lord" as given in our modern translations. A Hebrew scholar can readily understand how an original "My brethren" might be changed by careless writing to "My lord."

And in the third place, the Jehovah or Lord of Gen. 18:1 who spoke to Abraham was most likely the pre-existent Savior. He it was who spoke to Moses, gave the law, and covenanted with his people Israel (see III Nephi 15:4,5). A pre-existent Savior would not partake of veal and cakes, and as for Elohim the Father, his name is not even mentioned in the Hebrew of Genesis 18. And the "lord" of Gen. 18:3 was probably a mortal being sent with authority from God. So our elders were undoubtedly wrong in their interpretation of the passage in Genesis. It was not right, therefore, to use it in their attempts to prove that God was a being of flesh and bones.

Dr. Talmage told me that he agreed with my reasoning and said that he was going to take what steps he could to discourage our elders in using the passage in the way I have described. My experience has been that our Church Authorities are always looking for solid, sensible, and reasonable interpretations of scripture, interpretations that are compatible with the basic principles of the Gospel.

Another illustration of the wrong application of the "proof-text" method by some of our Church members is their use of Amos 8:11,12 to prove that there was a "Great Apostasy" in the early Christian Church. When Amos said that the Lord would send a famine in the land, a "famine of hearing the words of the Lord," he had reference to the condition that the iniquitous people of the kingdom of Israel would shortly find themselves in if they did not change their ways. And indeed, the prophecy of Amos was fulfilled when, about thirty years later (721 B.C.), the Assyrians captured Samaria and overthrew Israel. The whole historical context of the Book of Amos shows that the prophet's words were directed to the tragic condition the people of Israel would find themselves in, and not to a great apostasy in the early Christian Church. No Latter-day Saint doubts that there was a general apostasy in the Christian Church, certainly I don't, but I do object to the use of Amos 8:11,12 as proof of the fact. Here I agree with Snell.

We see by these illustrations that the use of the "proof-text" method, even in the Church, must be accompanied by a desire on the part of the interpreter to study, ponder, and search out all available facts, or wrong conclusions may be drawn. But if occasionally errors in interpretation occur using this method, let us keep in mind that the same thing happened in the Primitive Church, as may be demonstrated in a few instances from the New Testament.

Snell cites as improper use of the "proof-text" method by our Church theologians the passage in Ezekiel 37:15-20 relating to the two "sticks," commonly interpreted as meaning the Bible and the Book of Mormon. Snell takes the common view that Ezekiel's own explanation (vv. 21-28) clearly means that the two "sticks" represent Israel and Judah respectively, which are to become "one nation." Now I agree that Ezekiel is predicting, among other things, the establishment of a united Israel, but I also think that Snell is very wrong in ruling out the possibility that the prophet is also predicting the unification of their scriptures. As the Book of Mormon says, "And it shall

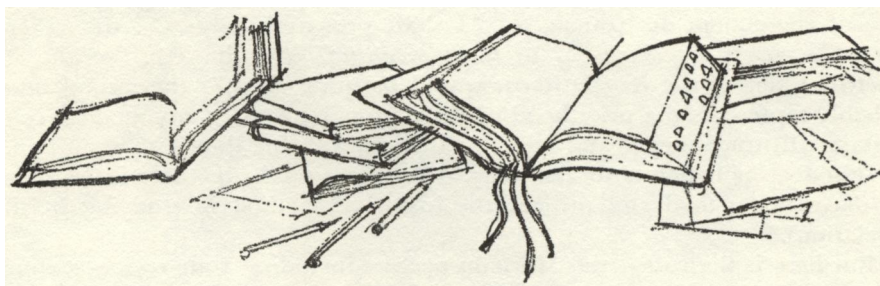
come to pass that my people, which are of the house of Israel, shall be gathered home unto the lands of their possessions; and my word also shall be gathered in one" (2 Nephi 29:14). Although I haven't the space here to justify my exegesis of the Hebrew text, I believe that a careful reading of Ezekiel 37:16-28 can enable one to understand my position. I hold that in verses 16-20 the Lord is telling Ezekiel to unite (v. 17) writings representing the scriptures of Judah and Israel and hold them up (verse 20) before the eyes of the people of the two kingdoms. Then in verses 21-28 the Lord advises the prophet to tell the people in effect that just as their scriptures are united together "before their eyes," so the two nations shall be united. Let the reader examine carefully the passage and see how reasonable my interpretation is. Verses 16-20 represent the unification of scripture and verses 21-28 the uniting of two nations. The allegory has two distinct parts, the second dependent upon the first.

I also agree with Professor Snell that when one is attempting to interpret a given passage of scripture its context and historical background should be carefully explored. We should try to obtain all of the basic facts about it that we can and then prayerfully undertake to divine its true meaning. But, unfortunately, the historical method is far from being a panacea for Bible interpretation, and one of the best proofs of its failure is Professor Snell's lame attempt to interpret for us the Book of Revelation. He gives us much summary but little or no concrete evidence for his conclusions. He admits that the Book's "setting and authorship are somewhat controversial," that "its character as an apocalypse makes its detailed interpretation often baffling," but assures us that "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." But where, oh where, Professor Snell, is your proof? And how are we to know that the "fundamentalist exegetes" are really so far wrong? And notice some of the statements you make. "I shall present briefly . . . the visions and make *general remarks as to their meaning*" (my italics), "to the instructed reader of the *Revelation* it would be quite clear," "the second beast probably represents the priesthood of the national cultus," "any modern commentary will trace these," and "they point unmistakably [how?] to Domitian," etc. Finally, Snell points to authority. "We have to thank those interpreters who have understood and utilized the historical method in studying it [the Revelation]."

But here is the rub — the Mormon people, including your reviewer, don't happen to believe that either Snell or his "interpreters" have proved their point. There is too much supposition and guess work in their exegesis, not enough real proof. If one has to depend upon authority, we would rather depend upon the authority of a great prophet like Joseph Smith, than upon commentators who, sincere and useful in their way, can make no great claims to heavenly wisdom.

Snell gives confident expression that scholars know well the "setting, purpose, and general meaning" of the Book of Revelation but fails to point out adequately that many competent students differ widely from each other in their interpretation of the book. Notice this point. Snell makes much ado

about the fact that Revelation stresses the nearness of the Second Coming (22:7,20) and adds, "Curiously, this is the point which those who would make the Revelation a guide-book to the future of the present world conveniently forget." Yet, Dr. Harold Lindsell, editor of the recent Harper Study Bible (p. 1862), affirms that though Christ has not as yet returned, this fact "does not destroy the sense of imminence." Dr. Lindsell also points out the four main schemes which have been followed in the interpretation of the Revelation, not to mention the three main eschatological schemes used in the interpretation of the thousand years in Revelation 20:1-10. And some things he says would give Snell some comfort. As added evidence of the confusion evident in biblical circles anent the interpretation of the Revelation, I call attention to four books, among others, upon my desk which also provide interpretations of the Book of Revelation. Two of them, Dr. James M. Gray's *Synthetic Bible Studies*, and Dr. Mark G. Cambron's *The New Testament*, I would class as "conservative" and differ widely in many aspects from what Snell and his "interpreters" would believe. The other two, Kee, Young, Froelich's *Understanding The New Testament*, and Price's *Interpreting The New Testament*, I would class as middle of the road to "liberal" in their approach. They would please Snell much better than the first two; they certainly do not agree in many respects with the interpretations found in the books of Gray and Cambron. Now I suggest that all of these authors are sincere in their efforts to interpret the Book of Revelation with reasonable accuracy, but the fact remains that they do not see eye to eye on many important aspects of it. And if the historical method is so good, why have so many competent scholars through the ages failed to agree on how the Revelation is to be interpreted? Whatever the answer, the fact remains Snell has failed in his essay to convince us that his views of the Revelation are correct.



Let me bring this part of my discussion concerning the use of the historical method to a close by giving a good illustration of how it would mostly fail to help in the interpretation of what, to the Mormon people, would be a very important passage of scripture. This example I have referred to elsewhere. It concerns Malachi 4:5-6 and deals with the Lord's sending "Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord,"

turning "the heart of the fathers," etc. Now rabbis, fathers, and commentators galore have given all sorts of explanations to this passage, but which is correct? Are any correct? Can the historical method decide the real meaning of the passage? I prefer to believe that it can't; at least it hasn't. And here is the need, say the Mormon people, for a prophet, a prophet like Joseph Smith to whom the resurrected ancient prophets came and explained the true meaning of Malachi's important words. You may have at hand all of the pertinent historical data known to scholars about a given passage of scripture and still be unable to explain what the inspired writer meant. This happens so often, I find in my own studies, that I am always grateful when a lead can be found coming from something that Joseph Smith said, something that has the ring of truth in it. And I can't emphasize enough the necessity in studying scripture, of exploring contexts, ascertaining all available historical facts, and of then praying for the help of the Holy Spirit. Without the help of the Holy Ghost I feel that one's role as interpreter of the Bible will generally fail.

In the last part of his essay, Professor Snell refers to an unfortunate incident that took place at Brigham Young University in 1911, in which three professors severed their relations with the institution growing out of "their supposed religious unorthodoxy." I wonder if Brother Snell hasn't let this incident affect his own career to a great extent. In his book, *Ancient Israel*, and in his essay he seems clearly not to accept Joseph Smith as the inspired prophet of this dispensation, nor does he seem to accept the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price as inspired scriptures. His influence in giving "constructive criticism" to the Mormon people will be relatively nil because of his unorthodoxy, and those of us who would have loved to have taught at his side couldn't do so for the same reason.

THE BIBLE, THE CHURCH, AND ITS SCHOLARS

Kent Robson

In Professor Snell's article and in the response to it by Professor Sperry, one finds the work of two committed members of the Church, who nevertheless appear to differ greatly on their interpretation of the Bible. It seems obvious to me that their different means of interpretation color the discussion of the Bible and its place in the Church out of proportion to the points of objective disagreement. Particularly in Sperry's essay, I sense an emotional reaction both to Snell himself and to his method of biblical interpretation which goes far beyond what can be justified from Snell's true position. As an interested student of the Bible, unscratched by the nettles of interpretational controversy, I wish, therefore to try to put these two essays into perspective to see insofar as it is possible, where the areas of disagreement are and how significant they are.

Snell commences his article with some suggestive and rather impressionistic remarks concerning the relative frequency of use of the Bible in the Church. But the most these remarks are intended to show is "interest trends," and Snell only suggests that more research on this topic would be interesting and desirable. I believe that Snell would be perfectly happy with Sperry's explanation as to why there have been so many articles in *The Contributor*