

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*

and the *Improvement Era* on the Book of Mormon; namely, because of the multifarious attacks on the Book of Mormon. Likewise Snell will most likely be happy to see the use of the Bible in the Sunday Schools of the Church documented. Of course Sperry has not refuted Snell's suggestion that there may be a trend to use the Bible less and less. But Sperry has provided some relevant data, and it is of interest to have this question of trends raised for future study.

Nevertheless, Snell could have dispensed with the entire first section of his paper, since his main interest is not *whether* the Bible is being used in the Church, but *how* it is being used. Once this is seen, we see that a sizeable portion of Sperry's response is also more or less irrelevant, since it is addressed to the former problem.

Snell's major point is that the Bible has been used exclusively as a "proof-text," and that this method is in general a very bad one. We become angry with the Catholics, Protestants, the Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.; for using the Bible as a "proof-text" and thus arriving at as many different interpretations as there are interpreters — yet we suppose that each and every Mormon may indiscriminately use this method of interpretation with impunity. Snell is right to direct our attention to this problem. There is an irrational inconsistency in the view that we can criticize our neighbors for using the same methods we use ourselves. On this point I think that Sperry and Snell are in some agreement, since Sperry as well as Snell is concerned with the dangers of the method and its results.

Before indicating where I think that Snell and Sperry disagree, let me add one further remark about the "proof-text" method of interpretation. The inherent danger of this method is most obvious when one reflects on the number of Christian denominations in the world. One reason for this great number, I suggest, is that biblical interpreters using the "proof-text" method have been able to "prove" most anything they wanted. On the other hand, the method that Snell proposes for our use, namely the historical or analytical method, has resulted in there being large areas of agreement among biblical scholars. The reason for this is clear. When a student uses the analytical method, the results of his studies are not "up for grabs." They are limited by the archaeological and historical materials with which one may quite objectively work. This is not to say that all Bible scholars agree. They do not. But the areas of agreement are wider in this kind of scholarship than they are both between the churches and between the interpreters within the churches when the "proof-text" method is relied upon.

A great deal of Sperry's response to Snell is concerned with Snell's remarks concerning the Prophet Joseph Smith. Frankly I am a bit surprised to see Sperry resorting to rhetoric and invective in his remarks rather than speaking directly to the issues. The only explanation I can think of for his remarks such as that Snell is "telling off" the Prophet is that Sperry has completely misunderstood Snell's point. Snell does not deny that Joseph Smith used the Bible, nor that the Prophet held the Bible in high esteem. In fact, Snell has high praise for the Prophet as being openminded and not dogmatic in his handling of the scriptures. What then is the point of Snell's quotations from the Prophet concerning the "proof-text" method? What Snell is doing is to plainly and simply give *examples* of the "proof-text" method. Many people will take these examples as attacks on the correctness of the Prophet's

interpretations. But the main point of listing the examples of the “proof-text” method is *not to question the interpretations*, but to *question the procedure* of using the scriptures *exclusively* in this manner. The doctrinal points raised by Snell’s examples may or may not be correct, but Snell is not essentially concerned with whether they are or not. It may well be that in some cases the scriptures quoted are indeed prophecies of the events they are used to predict, still this is inconsequential to Snell’s thesis that this is generally a poor way to use scriptures — particularly if, as is true in our time, better ways are available. A quotation from Snell will perhaps clear up the misunderstanding and put Snell’s thesis in better perspective.

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.* (italics Snell’s)

Now that we have Snell’s main thesis before us, we see that Sperry’s assertions that Snell is “telling off” the Prophet or that Snell does not “accept Joseph Smith as the inspired prophet of this dispensation” are really beside the point and incorrect. Furthermore, I know from personal acquaintance with Snell that Sperry’s assertions concerning Snell’s lack of acceptance of the Prophet, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price are blatantly and cruelly false.

As I pointed out earlier, Sperry agrees with Snell that the loose “proof-text” way of handling the scriptures can be dangerous and can lead to false interpretations; witness, for instance, Sperry’s examples from his discussion with Dr. James E. Talmage, and the incorrect interpretation from Amos. But still Sperry goes on to argue that since the Prophet and the Savior used this method of Bible interpretation, the method is really all right. This sounds a little like telling a child that it is okay to play with a bomb, but not to drop it because it might go boom. My first comment about this argument is, then, that most of us are not prophets nor are we the Savior. That is one good reason for not playing with the bomb. There are still other comments that can be made about the argument. One is that the analytical method of handling the scriptures is a very recent development, first occurring in the latter part of the nineteenth century. What would be more natural than for the Savior and the Prophet to use the only method of interpreting the scriptures that was known and understood by the people of that time? Still another point: Sperry cites as an example of “proof-text” Matthew’s claim that Jesus’ return from Egypt was in fulfillment of the prophecy in Hosea 11:1. Yet what Matthew’s remark shows is not that Hosea’s prophecy refers to the Savior, but that for all of Matthew’s good intentions to make the Savior’s message palatable to the Jews by connecting the Savior with the Old Testament, Matthew has misused Hosea’s scripture. Let us read Hosea’s scripture: “When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of EGYPT.” (Hosea 11:1) Israel is the son here, and the time of the calling out of Egypt is at the time of the Exodus.¹ For the reader who is

¹ Cf. James M. Ward, *Hosea*, Harper & Row, New York, 1966, pp. 191-200, especially p. 198.

skeptical of calling the nation Israel, a son, I draw your attention to the book of Exodus, 4:21-23. Here the Lord tells Moses to say to Pharaoh, "Israel is my son, even my first born: and I say unto thee, Let my son go, that he may serve me." Rather than strengthening Sperry's case this example from Hosea only indicates again the danger of using the scriptures to prove whatever you want to prove. Even the writers of the Gospels were not exempt from this danger.

Where there is most disagreement between Snell and Sperry is on specific interpretations of some scriptures. But even here there are misunderstandings. For example, when Snell discusses the Spirit that descended "like a dove" as reported in Matthew and Mark, Sperry asks why Snell does not refer to the Prophet's explanation of the sign of the dove. The answer here is rather straightforward. Snell does not refer to the Prophet's account because he is here *illustrating* the "historical method" (not trying to give a definitive interpretation). In so doing, Snell may legitimately indicate what the symbol seems to have meant historically without entering the controversy as to whether the historical meaning was correctly understood by Matthew and Mark themselves. Similar remarks could be made about Snell's use of the Revelation example, which is designed not to argue for some positive interpretation of Revelation, but primarily to give a sketchy illustration of the historical or analytical method.

Let me summarize. Snell proposes a new method of handling scriptures. Sperry is in at least partial agreement with the method and sees the danger along with Snell of using the old method indiscriminately. Sperry is strongly concerned with Snell's examples from the Prophet Joseph Smith and some other Mormon writers. I suggest this concern rests on a mistake, namely, that Snell is attacking the *interpretations* given in the examples. Rather, I suggest, Snell gives *examples* of the old *method*, and then goes on to encourage the use of a new and different method. It would appear that Sperry is at least partially in sympathy with the new method, so it seems to me that Sperry and Snell are not in such essential disagreement as it might at first appear.

Both Snell and Sperry know the Bible well. Both have written books about it. Snell's book *Ancient Israel*² was commissioned by the Church through Dr. Franklin West, former Church Commissioner of Education, and the book was championed by Dr. West and used in the Institutes of the Church for some time. Sperry's book *The Voice of Israel's Prophets*³ has recently been used as the text for the Gospel Doctrine class in the Sunday School. It is, therefore, distressing to see the one writer castigating the other because of some differences in interpretation. Sperry claims to be optimistic about the use of the Bible in the Church because there are now more trained teachers, and more experts in the Church to instruct the teachers. And yet I am certain that both Sperry and Snell would agree that the main stream of biblical scholarship, much of which is valuable, has been passing the majority of members of the Church by. Here I believe that Sperry is too optimistic when he says "the Mormon people . . . don't happen to believe" such and

² *Ancient Israel: Its Story and Meaning*, 3rd ed., University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1963.

³ Deseret Book Company, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1952.

such. I am afraid that most Mormon people don't know about, nor have they thought about many of the biblical problems. Hence these people can't speak at all; they simply don't have any beliefs on some crucial issues. Those who do speak are people such as Sperry, and only by defining those who disagree with him as non-Mormon, could Sperry possibly construe his voice as the one voice of the Mormon people.

I claimed that biblical scholarship has been passing Mormons by. As some substantiation for that claim, I ask where, among Mormon writers, does one hear discussion of, for example, the "documentary hypothesis (JEPD)" of the Hexateuch, in spite of the fact that the eminent Scholar Yehezkel Kaufman has called this hypothesis "the foundation of modern biblical scholarship."⁴ Likewise, where among Mormon writers does one hear the slightest mention of the "Q" source in a discussion of the synoptic gospels, i.e., Matthew, Mark, and Luke of the New Testament. The origin and development of the New Testament Canon has been largely ignored by Mormon writers in spite of the crucial role these investigations play in a discussion of several basic issues. I choose to believe that this disregard of biblical scholarship is not an indication of fear and insecurity vis-a-vis certain cherished beliefs, but rather reflects only a lack of knowledge among the members of the Church. But if it is ignorance we are facing, then qualified and committed men such as Snell and Sperry should be expending their most diligent efforts to enlighten us. There is obviously much to be done, and I hope this Roundtable will only serve as a springboard for at least some work in this direction.

We Mormons are, in some ways, in a unique position regarding biblical study. For we have "modern day scriptures" and recent pronouncements by prophets acting in their capacity as prophets. Our position regarding the scriptures must be one where our final views are consistent with these recent scriptures. But this does not mean that we must cling "for dear life" to outdated traditional views that are simply no longer tenable. My suggestion is that there is a viable and defensible middle ground in which we must, in some cases, change our interpretations in order to make them consistent with all of the data, even the latter-day scriptural ones. Old dichotomies are frequently much too simple.

One example should illustrate my point. One dichotomy received from tradition is concerned with the documentary thesis alluded to above and says we must either believe that Moses wrote the Pentateuch as we have it today, or that Moses didn't have anything to do with writing it, that it was solely the work of later Hebrew writers. Let me discuss the latter view first. Almost no biblical scholar will claim that Moses had nothing to do with the Pentateuch. Archaeology has confirmed the historicity of much of the Exodus account. Most scholars believe that the record as we have it in the Old Testament today contains ancient materials, which may very well have been written in part by Moses. Yet a vast majority of biblical scholars concur in the view that Moses did not write the whole of the first five books of the Old Testament as we have them today. There are strong reasons for this view, and for a discussion of them I refer the reader to H. H. Rowley's paper-

⁴ *The Religion of Israel*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1960.

back book *The Growth of the Old Testament*.⁵ Before we investigate the other side of the dichotomy, let us sample further the viewpoints of some of the best and most recent writers on the documentary hypothesis. John Bright in his *A History of Israel*⁶ writes: "The documentary hypothesis still commands general acceptance, and must be the starting point of any discussion," and "Awareness of this [modern archaeological discoveries] has, to be sure, forced scholars to no general abandonment of the documentary hypothesis." I have already mentioned Kaufman's remarks above. Let me add one more statement from Kaufman. "Several of the conclusions of this theory [the documentary hypothesis] may be considered assured. To this category belongs the analysis of the three primary sources—J,E,P, and D—with their laws and narrative framework."⁷ The authority for this view could be vastly multiplied. To name a few, W. F. Albright, Martin Noth, the latest H. H. Rowley books, the writers in D. Winton Thomas's (ed.) book *Documents from Old Testament Times*, the writers in the J. Phillip Hyatt (ed.) volume *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, the writers in G. Ernest Wright's (ed.) book *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, W. Zimmerli, *The Law and the Prophets*, and C. A. Simpson in his *The Growth of the Hexateuch in the Interpreter's Bible*, could all be marshalled in defense of the documentary thesis. There are a few dissenters, but they are few and far between, and generally represent institutional interests, such as the Catholic Church.

I claimed above that the other side of the dichotomy is the view that Moses wrote the five books of the Pentateuch exactly, or almost exactly as we have them today. In view of the evidence given by the scholars mentioned above, we must "search our souls mightily" if we are to continue to hold to this view. But is there any other choice for Mormons? For doesn't the Book of Mormon say in 1 Nephi 5:11 that the records taken from Jerusalem contained the "Five books of Moses?" Yes, we agree that the Book of Mormon does say that, but it doesn't say which five books of Moses the Nephites had. The books they had contained prophecies, a genealogy, and a record of the Jews, but still these books do not need to be identical with what we call today "the five books of Moses." Perhaps they contain only the materials handed down from Moses that were used in later writing today's text, as the scholars above might claim. Or might not we suppose that when Joseph was translating, he came across "books of Moses" and knowing there were five in our own Bible, added in the "five" himself. Perhaps, however, there were only two or three books.

I am not interested in defending any of these possibilities here. I think we must keep open the possibility that the scholars are mistaken. But I also think that we should keep open the possibility that our traditional Mormon interpretation is mistaken. Again I hope that men like Sperry and Snell as well as others will assist us in advancing beyond the superficial to a deeper understanding of the scriptures. Surely we do need to "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me" (John 5:39).

⁵ Harper & Row, New York, 1963, pp. 15-46.

⁶ The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1959, pp. 62-63.

⁷ Op. cit., p. 155.