

FAITH AND HISTORY: THE SNELL CONTROVERSY

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IN EARLY MARCH, 1937, ELDER JOSEPH FIELDING SMITH, of the Council of the Twelve, sent a strongly worded letter to church Commissioner of Education Franklin West. The subject of Elder Smith's criticism was a pair of talks delivered at the January meeting of LDS institute directors in Salt Lake City. One address was given by the former president of Brigham Young College in Logan, W.W. Henderson. Henderson, who long had been associated with the church school system, was then professor of biology at Utah State Agricultural College. The second talk, which seemed to trouble Elder Smith even more, was delivered by Heber Snell, recently appointed director of the institute in Pocatello. Both addresses manifested an intellectual tendency of which Elder Smith was deeply suspicious—a willingness to reinterpret traditional Mormon beliefs in the light of new scientific and historical learning. To this Elder Smith replied bluntly: "If the views of these men become dominant in the Church, then we may just as well close up shop and say to the world that Mormonism is a failure."¹

Shortly before Elder Smith wrote to Commissioner West, Snell himself received a letter from his fellow speaker, Henderson, who differed significantly from Smith in his evaluation of Snell's address: "I believe that it is the most noteworthy treatment of Old Testament studies committed to a paper full of sound sense that has ever been made in the Church. I am sure too that the assembly unanimously support you in your conclusions unless it be for one single person. I am sure that you know whom I am referring to. I liked your paper so much and feel so glad to have such a worthy study made available to the thinking men of the Church."^{2, 3}

This was neither the first nor the last of conflicting responses to critical biblical study in Mormonism. Neither was it the only one involving Snell. In the broader

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perspective it is only symbolic of deeper tensions just below the placid surface of the twentieth century church. Snell himself represented a number of these concerns. He had studied under William Henry Chamberlin at BYU and edited the *White and Blue* in 1911, the year of the "modernist" crises there. He later studied with E. E. Erickson at the University of Utah and taught education and psychology at Snow College from 1923 to 1936. When Snow College became a state institution in 1936 Snell moved to Pocatello to direct the LDS institute there before moving to the institute in Logan in 1947.⁴ During his eleven years as institute director in Pocatello, he attended the University of Chicago, receiving a Ph.D. in biblical studies in 1941.⁵ While Snell was a committed scholar, church educator and sincere man of faith, he reflected the same modernist concerns that troubled his mentors Chamberlain and Erickson.

Snell's career in the institute system coincided with a period of intellectual ferment in church education. Men with acknowledged scholarly competence entered the system in the 1930's and 1940's. Successive commissioners of education Joseph Merrill, John Widtsoe and Franklin West were men of academic achievement. Merrill and West had come from prestigious positions at state universities, and under their tutelage the men in the institute system were actually encouraged to pursue serious graduate study in religious subjects outside the church educational system.⁶

West envisioned a number of far reaching changes in the church educational system. Under his direction those with special competence in areas covered in the institute curriculum wrote texts published by the Church Department of Education. Sometimes these works were propagandistic. More often than not, however, they were competent introductions reflecting the best contemporary scholarship.⁷ West further envisioned a serious graduate program in religion at BYU in which Snell would teach biblical studies and Sterling McMurrin would teach comparative philosophy of religion.⁸

These dreams were only partially realized. BYU did develop a graduate program in religion, but it was hardly the type he envisioned. Some in the institute program produced works of relative academic merit, but most of those who did either failed to follow up their auspicious beginnings or else did so only after leaving the institute system.

In the intellectual ferment of the '30's and '40's no institute project was as controversial as the 1949 publication of Snell's book *Ancient Israel*. Its publication brought to a head the tensions latent in this intellectual ferment in a church, many of whose members and leaders were conservative and suspicious of intellectuals.

After completing his studies at the University of Chicago, Snell began researching and writing a history of ancient Israel. He began with the encouragement of Commissioner West, who planned to include it in the series of texts that his office was publishing.⁹ In the process of drafting the manuscript Snell had several people read it, including those with both Mormon and non-Mormon viewpoints. Sterling McMurrin read the manuscript closely as did Snell's teacher William Irwin at Chicago. Both thought highly of the work, as their later reviews made clear. The manuscript was also read approvingly by J. Wiley Sessions, director of religious activities at BYU.¹⁰

Franklin West himself read the completed manuscript with great care.¹¹ He is

reported to have liked it but found it too controversial to be published by his department. He knew that some of his superiors would not approve of some things in the book.¹² Although he was unwilling to publish the book, he did agree to purchase copies for all institute libraries if Snell had it published on his own. This would help with sales and would make the prospect more attractive to a publisher.¹³ Snell asked West to recommend that the book be used in the institute system, but West declined because of potential repercussions.¹⁴

Snell finally published the book in the fall of 1948 and, just as West feared, it aroused a storm of controversy involving LDS General Authorities, institute teachers and other church members. Initial reviews in both the local and national press were favorable. Sterling McMurrin's review in *The Personalist* was generally favorable. Even more effulgent praise appeared from Irwin in the *Journal of Religion*:

The clarity, brevity, dependability and not less the spirit of the book constitute it at once as first rank source material for the church school teacher. It comes as a sort of answer to prayer for the religious educator in whose bibliography there are very few volumes that can be recommended without reserve for their comprehensive coverage, their soundness of fact and interpretation and hence, their character as adequate introductions to the study of the Old Testament.¹⁵

In the Mormon community, however, despite some favorable comment, all was not well. The controversy surrounding Snell and his book began in earnest in December when Earl Harmer of Salt Lake began circulating an "open letter" to Snell, attacking his book as the work of a person who does not believe in Mormonism. In reference to Snell's idealist, developmental theory of the Old Testament and its history, Harmer wrote:

How do you reconcile our LDS teachings that the Bible in prophetic sections is the positive revelations of God through his prophets with your inference that large portions are only human compositions of morally primitive and sometimes deceptive men?

Though this was an over-simplification, it reveals Harmer's deeply held hostility toward Snell's position. Harmer felt these "advocates of modernism," as he called them, were essentially anti-Mormon: "Their theories strike at the very heart of our LDS teachings."¹⁶

Early in January Snell responded to Harmer's letter with "an open letter to Earl Harmer" that appears to have attained only limited circulation.¹⁷ He accused Harmer of innuendos and dogmatism but summarized his own case in a more positive vein:

It seems evident to me from your criticisms of my book that you have missed its great themes and the heavy support it gives to fundamental LDS theology. From beginning to end the book speaks of a personal God, the creator and sustainer of the universe. Its central theme is the revelation of this same being in history and particularly, in ancient times, through Israel. He is shown to be a God of justice, kindness, power and love, attributes ascribed to him by the greatest prophets and Jesus. There are many other important truths given in the book, as well as historical facts which incidentally lend strength to the

teachings of the Church. How could you have missed all these things in your reading of the book?

I do not agree with you that such teachings of the modernists as you refer to "strike at the heart of our LDS teachings." Tell me, please, what "the heart" of LDS teaching is? Is it not that *the God of justice and love lives and reveals himself to men for their salvation and that we today are sharers of this revelation*? If it is not this what is it? These matters you refer to, dealing entirely with the authorship of certain biblical books, are certainly of minor importance compared to the real fundamentals.¹⁸

Snell and Harmer exchanged more letters as the controversy grew more intense.¹⁹ In February, three of Snell's students at the institute in Logan, impelled in part by Harmer's attacks, wrote letters to the church Board of Education complaining about Snell's "orthodoxy." The letters pictured Snell as being "out of harmony" with the doctrines of the Church. When combined with Harmer's letters and the general content of his book, they prompted a full hearing by the Executive Committee of the Church Board of Education. West, always Snell's defender, asked Snell to prepare a reply to both the students' complaints and Harmer's letter.²⁰ Snell did so in a closely written statement that was carried by West to the Executive Committee early in March.²¹

The students' complaints seemed trivial to Snell, one from a student who had been in his class only two days and another from one who seemed simply to distrust all "scholars." In a letter to West he said frankly: "The more I considered the charges against me the less justified they seemed to be. I feel quite certain that the committee will see them in the same light."²² Snell felt it was more important to clear himself of the charges of heresy that surrounded the book. In his statement to the board, Snell emphasized several points he considered crucial to his viewpoint. He first reiterated his belief, already expressed to Harmer, that the book supported the basic position of the Church. He claimed it was different from many works on the Old Testament because it interpreted Israel's history in terms of a divine mission and thus denied a purely "humanistic approach." Second, and perhaps more fundamentally, he insisted that the Church does not stand or fall on questions of date and authorship of biblical books.

Authorship is an historical matter and must be dealt with by historical processes. It is not one of the fundamentals of religion. The existence of the Church does not depend upon a book but upon God. All books, including the Bible, could go, yet the Church would remain if it carried the authentic marks of authority as the bearer of God's revelation. This position, it seems to me, is incontrovertible.²³

Finally, Snell defended his use of the hypothesis that there was more than one author of the material found in the Book of Isaiah. In a cautiously worded statement, he argued that no one had yet shown conclusively that any part of chapters 40 to 66 of Isaiah were actually written by the prophet. He further reasoned that even if some of these chapters were demonstrated to have come from a "second Isaiah" many questions would remain about the precise dates of those sections quoted in the Book of Mormon.

Given the tenuous nature of the students' charges against Snell and the vigorous support of West and of the institute director in Logan, W. W. Richards, Snell was

cleared of the charges of heresy by the board.²⁴ Nevertheless, the controversy surrounding the book did not cease. Joseph Fielding Smith took an active part in virtually "banning" the book from church institutes and BYU. He also sent Snell a questionnaire to test the "soundness" of his doctrines even after Snell had been officially cleared by the Board of Education.²⁵ Snell's detailed reply will be considered later.

In the midst of this negative reaction, Snell received increasing support from several quarters in the Church. Intellectuals in the church school system, products of the same background as he, gave him vigorous support in private. Even before Harmer had written his first "open letter," Thomas Martin, dean of BYU's College of Applied Science wrote to a member who had inquired about the book: "I am using it in my Old Testament classes at the present time . . . I have taught Old Testament for about 30 years and it is the first time I have come across a book that I can use as a text that gives the point of view that has developed in me as the result of the teaching over these years." Shortly after the appearance of the first Harmer letter, a long time friend, M. Wilford Poulson, then chairman of BYU's psychology department, wrote to praise the book and to offer his own criticisms of the attitudes he saw behind the attacks on Snell and his work. "Alas, too often," he said, "we have ignorant name calling, propaganda, pressure-group techniques, rationalizing, even excommunications for so-called wrong beliefs, etc. . . . We have almost no place in our lives for a worthy open forum."²⁶

As controversy over the book increased in the spring, Snell received more support from church educators. Shortly after his exoneration by the board, Eugene Campbell, who had succeeded Snell as director in Pocatello, wrote to him about plans to encourage sale of the book to Pocatello students. He also included a note of personal congratulations: "I was happy to learn that you were completely vindicated in your recent test with some of the narrower elements in our church. I guess such unpleasantness is to be expected when one plays the role of prophet in any line of endeavor."²⁷

When the controversy heated up in April and May, Sterling McMurrin wrote a lengthy reply to Harmer's "open letter" and he and Snell decided to circulate this articulate defense. It was sent to several selected supporters and all institute directors.²⁸ McMurrin also spoke in support of the book to several institute groups and other gatherings. Both McMurrin and Snell received a good deal of private support from institute directors, several of whom wrote to McMurrin praising his position or replied to Harmer themselves. Perhaps most revealing of the pressures and sympathies these men labored under was a letter from Gustive Larson, director of the institute in Cedar City: "I envy you the ability and the opportunity to reply so effectively to a malicious 'open letter.' Not only because of my inability to reply so effectively, but because of my position, I have restrained an impulse to do similarly."²⁹

While this support was being generated among church educators, many other church members also wrote to Snell expressing appreciation for his book.³⁰ Responses even came from three General Authorities. Elders John A. Widtsoe and Joseph Merrill, members of the Council of the Twelve, wrote to Snell commenting favorably on the book; neither of them had finished the book, but both said they liked what they had read. Of the two Merrill was especially

supportive. "The reading already done indicates to me that you are scholarly and have written a good book, much better for our use than any other writer who is a non-member. . . . I hope your book will be widely used, but may I say that I have nothing nowadays to say about the texts that are used anywhere in our church school system, not being a member of any committee charged with the duty of reading or approving."³¹

In contrast to this restrained support, Levi Edgar Young of the First Council of Seventy praised the book enthusiastically. As early as November 1948, he wrote to Snell calling his book a "noble piece of work" and promising to write a review of it for the *Era*. Two months later, he apologized for not having finished the promised review. In the same letter he contrasted Snell's book with others written for church audiences:

I want to say that you have made a contribution to our religious literature. Nine-tenths of the secondary books being written concerning religion and the history of the Church are, to me, nothing but rehashes, bad English, and superficial thought. It is a shame that we are sponsoring the bad material that is being written.³²

In January he did send a review to the *Era* but, with its penchant for avoiding controversy, the *Era* never ran it.³³ Elder Young, however, continued to support Snell. He circulated the review among friends he knew would be interested and sympathetic. He continued to praise the work in letters, offering comfort in his trials: "You have done a fine piece of work and you will yet find out that the greater the work a man does, the more rocks he will bump up against." He even wrote to Sterling McMurrin praising McMurrin's reply to Harmer. As late as 1955 Elder Young continued to write Snell, praising his book and criticising the works of others: "I think you have produced a historic book. It shows at least a careful study of ancient Israel. . . . The literature that is being sold by a certain bookstore here cheapens the gospel and takes away from the great work the Divine feeling and hope for the future. Your book is praiseworthy and I want you to be encouraged."³⁴

Throughout the whole affair, Snell's most vital critic was Joseph Fielding Smith. The two men carried on an extensive discussion of the issues both through letters and in person. In May 1949, after Snell answered the questionnaire Elder Smith sent, the two met and discussed their differences. They subsequently exchanged letters on the interpretation of Ezekiel 37:15-28, which speaks of the "stick of Judah" and the "stick of Joseph." This passage had been a favorite with Mormons for over a century; they believed it lent support to the idea that there were to be two scriptural records, the Bible and the Book of Mormon. The passage says the two "sticks" would be joined together. To Mormons this traditionally meant this coming together of the Bible and Book of Mormon in the restored church.³⁵

If this was the meaning of the passage, it completely escaped Snell. He argued that the text plainly prophesied of the reuniting of Israel. The text itself, he asserted, made no mention of "books" and, given Ezekiel's role as a prophet during the Babylonian captivity, it made more sense to Snell to see this as a message of national reunification given to the people in captivity. In fact, he said, the text of Ezekiel itself gives the meaning of the two sticks precisely in this

fashion. Moreover, Snell did not feel that the truth of the Book of Mormon was affected by the interpretation of these verses. "It seems to me," he said, "it would be better for us to rely on other evidence for the Book of Mormon than the Ezekiel prophecy."³⁶

Elder Smith's reply began right at the heart of the issue, namely that scholars alone cannot understand the Bible nor can they interpret it correctly:

I maintain that it is impossible for the great scholars to properly interpret the Bible because of this fact, for they do not believe in revelation and that the Lord has restored to his Church many of these plain things which were taken out . . . then again the sacred writings cannot be interpreted by men who are uninspired by the light of the Spirit of the Lord.³⁷

He further expressed unquestioning faith both in the Church's standard scriptures and in the interpretations given those scriptures by Joseph Smith; according to Elder Smith, scriptural interpretation was one of the express functions of the prophet. These methodological presuppositions largely determined his understanding of the Ezekiel passage. Because Joseph Smith had apparently taught that the stick of Joseph was the Book of Mormon, the matter was settled. Doctrine and Covenants Section 27, verse 5, seemed to lend additional revelatory support to the traditional Mormon interpretation.³⁸

The disagreement between Smith and Snell involved more than the interpretation of specific biblical texts. There were more fundamental issues separating these men. For Snell, biblical texts and documents should be interpreted with the same honesty and objectivity governing historical research in general. The common opinion of church members and leaders was to be considered mere opinion until tested against the facts of historical research. Snell himself was usually very cautious in making claims of certainty in biblical studies. As an "insider," he knew the vicissitudes of the discipline, and he regularly prefaced his interpretations with statements about the fluctuating nature of the evidence. One thing he was certain, however: the historian could be guided only by evidence, not by opinion however "authoritative" it might be.³⁹

It was this willingness to revise authoritative opinions in the light of modern "scholarship" that Joseph Fielding Smith fought throughout his career as a General Authority. It was most clearly manifest in his hostility toward biological evolution, but it was also evident in other disciplines. For Elder Smith, all scholarship was suspect if it conflicted with the literal word of God in the scriptures or the teachings of the modern prophets. One could not compromise the faith to accommodate the findings of scientists or historians; compromise could only destroy the faith. Elder Smith was the only General Authority who ever spoke in favor of banishing the teaching of evolution from the public schools. It is therefore not difficult to see why he worked to have Snell's book banished from church schools.⁴⁰

A year after their dispute over the interpretation of Ezekial, Snell and Elder Smith were still engaged in lively debate. Snell wrote Elder Smith proposing that the two of them exchange views in a public forum such as the *Deseret News*. Elder Smith replied that he would ask the First Presidency's opinion on the matter. One week later he denied the request with the implication that the decision was

the First Presidency's. The reason given reflected fear of open, controversial discussion that has often marked some of the responses of church leaders to major intellectual disputes. Elder Smith believed such debate would only divide the saints and give a forum to Snell's erroneous views.⁴¹

By summer 1949, open conflict over Snell's book had subsided. Snell had been cleared of charges of heresy by the Executive Committee of the Church Board of Education. He was not fired from the church educational system. His book, however, had been banned as a text in that same system. Snell was still involved in some disputes, primarily with Sidney Sperry, but they lacked the intensity of the previous months.⁴² Snell continued teaching at the Institute in Logan, but in January 1950, at the age of 67, he was informed that he would not be rehired the next year. It is uncertain whether this forced retirement was due to his age, or to the controversy over his book.⁴³

In ensuing years Snell continued to defend his book and the opinions he had expressed during the controversy. Unable to obtain what he considered a fair statement of the Church's reasons for banning the book, he appealed directly to George Albert Smith, President of the Church.⁴⁴ He received no response before President Smith's death. He tried to have the book read by the succeeding president, David O. McKay, but again seems to have received no response. In 1952, he approached Elder Mark E. Peterson of the Quorum of the Twelve with a suggestion that Elder Peterson discuss his conservative approach to the scriptures with a study group of which Snell was a member. Elder Peterson refused, bluntly agreeing with Joseph Fielding Smith's assessment of Snell's heretical status.⁴⁵

In his last years, Snell was known only to a handful of former students, whom he taught part-time at Utah State University. He occasionally wrote essays on religious and biblical themes. His death in 1973 in Logan went largely unnoticed, even among the community of Mormon scholars to whom he had early distinguished himself. The issues he raised concerning Mormon scholarship, however, will never pass.

II

Since the turn of the century Mormons have taken an interest in critical Bible study. Their interest, however, was often sporadic, finding expression for the most part in occasional conference talks or articles in church magazines.⁴⁶ Although an issue at BYU in 1911, it was only part of a larger controversy over evolution. Some church apologists have adopted findings of so-called "higher critics" where they seemed to support Mormon orthodoxy.⁴⁷ Most frequently, however, critical studies of the Bible were simply ignored. Certainly there had been nothing comparable to the intense concern which Snell's book aroused.

In one sense, however, the controversy surrounding Snell's book was a new variation of an old theme. Until that time there had been few, if any, works of serious biblical scholarship published by church members;⁴⁸ there certainly were none before 1940.⁴⁹ Since the turn of the century, however, Mormons of unimpeachable academic and religious standing had been trying to reconcile modern science and historical thought with traditional Mormon orthodoxy. The most apparent and divisive of these attempts was the long controversy over evolution;

but that was not the only issue, nor would it be the last.

Snell's attempt to combine sincere Christian and Mormon commitments with critical study of the biblical sources of those beliefs encompasses a number of crucial presuppositions. These are expressed both in his book and in his letters. To better understand Snell's achievement and the concerns of his critics a closer examination of these beliefs is necessary.

For a biblical scholar in the Church the most important doctrinal questions are revelation and inspiration. It is here that Snell needed a basic, philosophical re-orientation to permit the kind of work he was doing. Snell accepted the idea that the Old Testament was inspired and that God had revealed himself in Israel's history in a special way.⁵⁰ This was not an issue that separated Snell from his critics. Rather, they were divided over the precise meaning of the terms "revelation" and "inspiration." In a letter to Joseph Fielding Smith, Snell stated his basic position in the following way:

I propose that we take up first the subject of revelation. I have made this concept central in my book, interpreting Ancient Israel as a revelation, a special revelation of God in the ancient world. I believe that you also think of this people as a chosen people, yet you would probably think of revelation mostly as verbal communication from God. I think there may be an occasional revelation of this type, but that this use of the term by no means exhausts its meaning. Instead, the larger meaning which I have made central in my book is much more fertile, from my point of view, for religious living and thinking. The broader concept of revelation, including within it productive thinking in morals and religion and the good life—into both of which I think that God always enters—is the concept that will be most meaningful and therefore most helpful to our people.⁵¹

In this passage there are two key points. First, Snell removed himself from a strict verbal or propositional view of revelation. Revelation, he maintained, does not come as a series of dogmatic propositions. This "expanded" view of revelation freed him from traditional beliefs about the biblical text, allowing for new views on the textual composition of the Bible and the historical accuracy of its statements while retaining a basic belief in the Bible as revelation.

The second point Snell makes is that revelation is a progressive development of the moral ideals of mankind, expressed through the teachings of great religious leaders and in the lives of religious communities.⁵² Revelation therefore is not so much God's actual speaking voice as it is a human record of God's activities. This view allowed Snell to separate word and act, and it opened the scriptures to critical scrutiny while retaining the primacy of God's revelation in the development of mankind's ideals and moral life.

At the center of this view was the belief that God's revelation to man was to be found primarily in the progressive development of the concept of "the moral life" in human history. As God's activities unfolded, man was presented with greater portions of the vision. The full purpose of God's activities, as well as the fullness of the vision itself, were not known by men in the beginning; they came to be known only through centuries of historical development culminating in the supreme revelation of "the divine life" in Jesus Christ.⁵³ Throughout the book, Snell emphasized this concept of developmental revelation. Believing that "ethical

monotheism" is the "most adequate and precious concept of Deity," Snell found it a simple matter to interpret events in the development of that religious viewpoint as examples of divine activity. One of Snell's examples will suffice to illustrate his interpretation:

The great covenant and Decalogue pointed the way toward ethical monotheism and the high religion of our own time. Surely God cannot be left out of account in such a significant historical development. His participation in it is what is meant by the revelation of God in history.⁵⁴

Historical events, not dogma, are the center of God's revelatory activity, according to Snell; insofar as men in their actions cooperate with God's moral purposes, they become bearers of his revelation in history. "History," Snell writes, "is not simply a succession of happenings; it is God's activity which takes place in cooperation with man, or in collision with him if he refuses to cooperate." Again he writes, "When men feel themselves entrusted with a Divine mission, and work changes in their own personal living as they seek to fulfill this mission, they become revealers of God."⁵⁵

Snell's concept of revelation allowed him to view historical questions such as authorship, date and origin of biblical texts as questions to be answered by historical scholarship. These questions were quite irrelevant to the truthfulness of the Gospel. As a scholar, however, Snell often adopted what he himself described as a conservative interpretation of many issues. He ascribed at least the beginnings of the pentateuchal traditions to Moses himself. He saw the Sinai experience as absolutely central in Israelite history. He viewed the conquest of Palestine as being accomplished by the exodus group rather than by gradual infiltration as some scholars have suggested. All of these were defensible scholarly positions, but they were clearly more conservative than many others and closer to traditional orthodoxy.⁵⁶

Snell's position on specific biblical issues, however, was not the heart of the controversy. The central issues were the assumptions inherent in his philosophy. The propositional view of revelation which Snell downplayed had been with Mormonism from the beginning and his departure from it was bound to be upsetting to many Mormons. Of greater concern, however, was his reliance on the methodology and conclusions of the historical "sciences" in his attempt to understand biblical history. Snell wanted to write a book with which Mormons and non-Mormons alike could agree; he nowhere appeals to uniquely Mormon authorities such as the Book of Mormon or Joseph Smith to support his interpretations of Old Testament history. As he wrote to Joseph Merrill: "I wrote a book which could be used as a text in institutions of college grade both within and without our Church."⁵⁷

This was something his Mormon critics considered impossible. For them such an attempt was a *de facto* denial of Mormonism's claims to special inspiration. If Joseph Smith was a prophet, then what he said must be true. Hence, if he had at one time spoken of the book of Daniel as having been written by a Daniel of the sixth century B.C., then it must be true despite what Snell considered the almost overwhelming case to the contrary made by modern scholars.⁵⁸ In short, where Snell demanded evidence his critics demanded faith.

In the end, however, Snell was as much a man of faith as were his critics; only his was a different kind of faith. They—many of them—were literalists, certain and secure in their possession of the unchanging revealed word. His was the faith of the liberal, willing to sacrifice literalism in favor of deep conviction about the meaningfulness of history and the truth of a non-historical core of the Gospel. Perhaps the most incisive summary of Snell's faith comes from a 1947 Christmas message he delivered on radio in Logan:

What does all this mean when put in other terms? It means that the Divine Spirit has been at work in the world from the beginning, making himself known and motivating men to learn and to live the good life, life as it is only in Him, for only so can their happiness be perfected. By many an individual example—by priest and prophet, scribe and sage—this kind of life has been revealed to us that we might know and follow it. And last of all by one great example, that of Jesus, our master and Lord, it has been made known to us what the Divine life is like in all its beauty and fullness.⁵⁹

Even here Snell adapted the facts of history to the demands of faith, though perhaps more discreetly than his critics would have done. He sought to discern God's role in history through historical research, but in the end he saw history with eyes of faith, just as his more conservative opponents did.

The issues separating Snell and his critics have never been resolved by the twentieth century church or its scholars. For Mormons the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith is as important to their faith as the Bible. Yet in the last quarter-century Mormon historians of impeccable academic and religious standing have been seriously engaged in writing a "new Mormon history" that could be acceptable to Mormons and non-Mormons alike. It becomes crucial, therefore, at this time to raise the questions involved in the controversy around Snell's book. Can such historical scholarship coexist in the community of the faithful? Does it not place the truthfulness of Joseph Smith's message at the mercy of the historian and the scientist? And if it does not, then do we not need a fundamentally new way of looking at the relation between scholarship and faith?

Snell himself was only doing what any competent historian would do when faced with similar circumstances. He was willing to commit himself to beliefs about the past only when the evidence warranted such commitment. Furthermore, and more fundamentally, he would not accept any beliefs about the past that were contrary to the known facts, even when those beliefs were found in the Bible. He remained to the end a scholar in search of an account of his faith that would not conflict with his commitment to historical inquiry.⁶⁰

Snell's commitment to the community of the faithful remained throughout the controversy, but his interpretation of that faith differed from that which was common in the community. Here was the real difficulty of his position. He pressed for a freedom from the traditions of the community but in the process he seems to have forgotten that religious communities in particular survive through the traditions they create and transmit.

If traditions serve to maintain a community through time, scriptural literalism serves to reinforce commitment from the average member. Mormon literalism has served to bring the central theological beliefs of the Church into the lives of many common people unable to grasp the philosophical views of those like Snell.

Without their commitment, reinforced through the conviction that they too could understand the scriptures as well as the scholars, the Church would be immeasurably weaker.

Yet without the challenge of the Snells in our midst, we face the danger of lapsing into the worst forms of naivete and irrationality, accepting myths as truths and forsaking evidence for superstition. To give an account of our faith that forsakes historical myths, while remembering the truth that religious communities live by myths, is the challenge that Snell has left to all of us in the Church. That few Mormon historians have yet to wrestle with these issues may serve to measure the achievement of one who did.

NOTES

¹ Joseph Fielding Smith to Franklin West, March 11, 1937. Copy located in the Church Historian's Library and Archives of the LDS Church in Salt Lake City, hereafter referred to as CHLA.

² W.W. Henderson to Heber Snell, January 28, 1937. Located in the Heber Snell papers in the Utah State University Library in Logan, hereafter referred to as HCS. The information on Henderson comes from Charles J. Sorenson et al, "W.W. Henderson," *Proceedings of the Utah Academy of Science, Arts and Letters*, 27 (1949), pp. 9-11.

³ Entitled "Criteria for Interpreting the Old Testament to College Youth," the paper was later included in a collection of his essays, *Through the Years: Occasional Writings* (Logan: Utah State University Library, 1968), pp. 95-102.

⁴ After graduating from BYU in 1912, he taught at various Church schools and academies before returning to the University of Utah and obtaining an M.A. in 1923. Some of the information on Snell comes from an unpublished autobiography in HCS. Other information comes from *Journal History*, Aug. 26, 1936, CHLA.

⁵ He wanted to be released to attend full time for a year, but West, though sympathetic, found that his depression-depleted budget would not allow it. West to Snell, Feb. 16, 1938, HCS. His dissertation was entitled *American Research on Jesus*; it was partially published in H.C. Snell, "American Lives of Jesus," *Religion in the Making*, 1(1940), pp. 531-551.

⁶ Some teachers in Church schools were actually "called" by the General Authorities to attend the University of Chicago Divinity School and return to impart that knowledge to the church. On this see Russel Swenson, "Mormons at the University of Chicago Divinity School," *Dialogue* 7 (Summer, 1972), pp. 37-47. This is the only treatment of the period so far from one of those who was originally called to go. Swenson graduated from Chicago with a Ph.D. in New Testament.

⁷ Cf Russel Swenson, *New Testament Literature*, (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, 1940); Sidney Sperry, *The Spirit of the Old Testament*, (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, 1940); and Daryl Chase, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, 1944). Swenson was the most open and explicit in adopting the main conclusions of modern New Testament scholarship. Also see Snell to Sterling McMurrin, Dec. 19, 1944, located in the Sterling McMurrin papers at the Marriot Library at the University of Utah, hereafter referred to as SM.

⁸ This is reported by Snell in a letter to McMurrin June 27, 1943. Others also had similar concerns about increasing the intellectual competence at BYU. In a letter to Snell, Thomas Martin, dean of the College of Applied Science, looked back to the 1911 affair in which three of the best qualified professors left the institution: "I feel that we lost much when the Chamberlains and the Petersons left us. If some of the narrowness which caused the upheaval in 1911 could have been prevented from exercising its power, I believe the vision that George Brimhall had in mind would have been accomplished; and if we could have had a free hand in dealing with these men and their associates, people would be singing our praises all over the country at the present time." Martin to Snell, March 16, 1942, HCS.

⁹ Snell to McMurrin, Dec. 19, 1944, SM; H. C. Snell, *Ancient Israel: Its Story and Meaning*, (Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, 1948) preface; Snell to McMurrin, March 6, 1948, SM.

¹⁰ J. Wiley Sessions to H.C. Snell, July 19, 1945; also Sessions to Snell, January 23, 1958.

¹¹ West to Snell, June 14, 1944, HCS. Snell to McMurrin, September 14, 1947, SM.

¹² Snell to West, September 30, 1947, HCS. Snell to McMurrin, October 30, 1947, and February 13, 1948, SM.

¹³ Snell to McMurrin, February 13 and April 8, 1948, SM.

¹⁴ Snell to McMurrin, October 13, 1947, SM. Snell to West, September 30, 1947, HCS.

¹⁵ *Journal of Religion*, 29(July, 1949), pp. 240–241; *The Personalist*, 30(1949), p. 318; *Review and Expositor*, 42(July 1950), p. 383; *Deseret News*, October 10, 1948; Irwin even recommended the work to the University of Chicago Press, Snell to McMurrin, March 6, 1948.

¹⁶ Harmer to Snell, December 23, 1948, SM.

¹⁷ Snell to Harmer, January 7, 1949. Two weeks later Franklin West, who apparently did not know of Snell's reply, wrote to Snell asking him not to reply to Harmer because that would just keep the dispute going, and adding, "he does not have too much influence anyway," West to Snell, January 20, 1949, HCS.

¹⁸ Harmer had specifically referred to Snell's view of the pentateuch as a compilation of different documents relating the same general history in different ways and to his willingness to see the book of Isaiah as being a collection of material from more than one prophet who lived at different times.

¹⁹ Harmer to Snell, February 19, 1949; Snell to Harmer, February 24, 1949, HCS.

²⁰ West to Snell, February 18, 1949, HCS.

²¹ Snell to the Executive Committee of the Church Board of Education, March 8, 1949, HCS.

²² Snell to West, March 9, 1949, HCS.

²³ Snell to the Executive Committee, op.cit., p. 4.

²⁴ Snell himself confided to McMurrin that West and Richards "put me over in the recent trouble," Snell to McMurrin, May 25, 1949, and in another letter he said that West "defended me mightily," Snell to McMurrin, March 3, 1949, SM.

²⁵ Smith to Snell, March 29, 1949. Snell originally wanted an oral exchange with Elder Smith regarding the questions, but Smith refused until Snell had answered the questions in writing, Snell to Smith, April 23, 1949, HCS.

²⁶ Martin to Mrs. Bowns, December 10, 1948; Poulson to Snell, January 1, 1949, HCS.

²⁷ Campbell to Snell, March 19, 1949, HCS.

²⁸ McMurrin to Harmer, April 23, 1949, SM. Snell to McMurrin, April 27, 1949, and McMurrin to Snell, May 17, 1949, HCS.

²⁹ W.W. Richards to Sterling McMurrin, May 31, 1949; Jay Christensen to Sterling McMurrin, May 23, 1949; George Boyd to Earl Harmer, June 1, 1949; Gustive Larson to Sterling McMurrin, May 25, 1949, all SM.

³⁰ There are many letters to this effect in the Snell collection, but the most revealing are those from Snell's longtime friend, Pocatello businessman and high council member Ezra Hawkes. Hawkes even wrote a sharply critical letter to Harmer. Elder Smith got a copy of the letter to Harmer and wrote an inquisitorial letter to Hawkes almost identical with the one he sent to Snell. Hawkes replied by refusing to answer Smith's questions and stating that if he had "they would be in disagreement on many things". After his letter to Smith the Stake President was informed and Hawkes was warned that he was "out of harmony with the brethren." He continued to support Snell anyway. See Hawkes to Harmer, May 1, 1949; Smith to Hawkes, May 25, 1949 (with Hawkes handwritten note at the bottom), SM; and Hawkes to Snell, May 1, 1949, and Hawkes to Snell, June 22, 1949, HCS.

³¹ Widtsoe to Snell, March 29, 1949; Merrill to Snell, March 29, 1949, HCS. Widtsoe had previously been a supporter of Snell and had even recommended him to Howard Macdonald, President of BYU, for a position there, Widtsoe to Snell, May 31, 1945, HCS.

³² Young to Snell, Nov. 16, 1948, and January 8, 1949, HCS. Young had also recommended Snell for a position at BYU, Young to Snell, May 21, 1945, HCS.

³³ A copy of the review is in the Snell collection.

³⁴ Young to Snell, June 21, 1949, HCS; Young to McMurrin, June 20, 1949, SM; Young to Snell, March 24, 1955, HCS.

³⁶ A good, short discussion of the issue is Jon Gunn, "Ezekiel, Dr. Sperry and the Stick of Ephraim," *Dialogue* 2(1967) pp. 137-140. This article is written in response to a debate between Snell and Sperry on "The Bible in the Church" in which this passage was used as an example. Cf. Heber Snell, "The Bible in the Church," and Sidney Sperry, "Scholars and Prophets," *Dialogue*, 2(1967), pp. 55-85.

³⁶ Snell to Smith, May 23, 1949, HCS.

³⁷ Smith to Snell, May 27, 1949, HCS.

³⁸ *History of the Church: Period I*, 5 vols., (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1953), I, p. 84; D&C 27:5, but see Gunn, *op.cit.*, for a different reading of this passage.

³⁹ For these views see Snell to the Executive Committee of the Church Board of Education, March 8, 1949; Snell to Smith, July 9, 1949; Snell to West, March 9, 1949, all HCS.

⁴⁰ Cf. Joseph Fielding Smith, "The Word of the Lord Superior to the Theories of Men," *Liahona*, 15(April 9, 1918), pp. 641-644.

⁴¹ Snell to Smith, June 5, 1950; Smith to Snell, June 5, 1949, and June 13, 1949, HCS.

⁴² Sperry to Snell, August 31, 1949; Snell to Sperry, September 20, 1949, HCS.

⁴³ Snell to McMurrin, January 7, 1950, SM.

⁴⁴ Snell to George Albert Smith, May 24, 1950, HCS.

⁴⁵ Snell to Peterson, October 24, 1952; Peterson to Snell, October 28, 1952; Snell to Peterson, Nov. 13, 1952; Peterson to Snell, Nov. 20, 1952, all HCS.

⁴⁶ Cf. George Reynolds, "Thoughts on Genesis," *The Contributor*, 3 (October, 1881), pp. 16-17; A.A. Ramseyer, "Who Wrote the Pentateuch," *Improvement Era*, 11(April, 1908), pp. 437-442; Hyrum M. Smith, *Conf. Reports*, (October 4, 1912), pp. 12-13; Joseph F. Smith, "Reason and the Scriptures," *Juvenile Instructor*, 47(April, 1912), pp. 204-205; Joseph F. Smith, Jonah and the Bible," *Juvenile Instructor*, 46(April, 1911), pp. 400-401; John Herrick, *Conf. Reports*, (April 6, 1913), pp. 98-99; Orson Whitney, *Conf. Reports*, (October 6, 1917), pp. 49-50; James Talmage, *Conf. Reports*, (April 6, 1911) and (April 6, 1929), pp. 44-49; Heber J. Grant, *Conf. Reports*, (April 6, 1935); Joseph Fielding Smith, "The Language of Adam," *Improvement Era*, 31(February, 1928), pp. 271-276.

⁴⁷ "What Version of the Bible to Buy," *Improvement Era*, 2(June, 1899), pp. 620-621; "Higher Criticism and God," *Improvement Era*, 8(March, 1903), pp. 149-150; Nephi Morris, "Bible Studies," *Improvement Era*, 1 (November 1897 to March 1898), a six part study; B.H. Roberts, *The Way, the Truth and the Life* (unpublished manuscript at CHLA); Franklin Harris, "Exploring the Universe," *Improvement Era*, 40(September, 1937), p. 563.

⁴⁸ On close inspection the two most likely candidates for consideration as students of modern biblical scholarship are far from it. James Talmage's *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1915) is something of a Mormon classic, but it is hardly a work of distinguished biblical scholarship. Talmage could not speak any of the primary languages involved, and he was unaware of the deeper methodological questions previously raised by Albert Schweitzer in his epochal *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery, (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1911). Like Talmage, B.H. Roberts was hostile to the main trends of modern New Testament research and knew none of the languages, though he does seem to have been more willing to debate the issues, cf. B.H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology: First Year*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1907), pp. 25-100.

⁴⁹ The Sunday School manuals written in the 1940's by Russell Swenson as well as his text written for the church education system were clearly receptive to the main trends of modern New Testament scholarship; cf. *Introduction to the New Testament*, (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, 1940); *The Synoptic Gospels*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1945); *The Gospel of John*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1946); *New Testament: Acts and Epistles*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1947).

⁵⁰ *AI*, Preface and pp. 280-281.

⁵¹ Snell to Smith, June 5, 1950.

⁵² *AI*, pp. 2-3.

⁵³ *AI*, pp. 10, 24, 32, 62, 70, 94, and especially pp. 264-265. On his view of Jesus as God's supreme exemplar of the moral life see his radio talk reported in *Journal History* June 14, 1936, CHLA, and a Christmas message delivered in Logan in 1947, reprinted in *Through the Years*, *op.cit.*, pp. 54-57.

⁵⁴ *AI*, p. 24.

⁵⁵ "God in History," *Through the Years*, op.cit., p. 56; *AI*, p. 3.

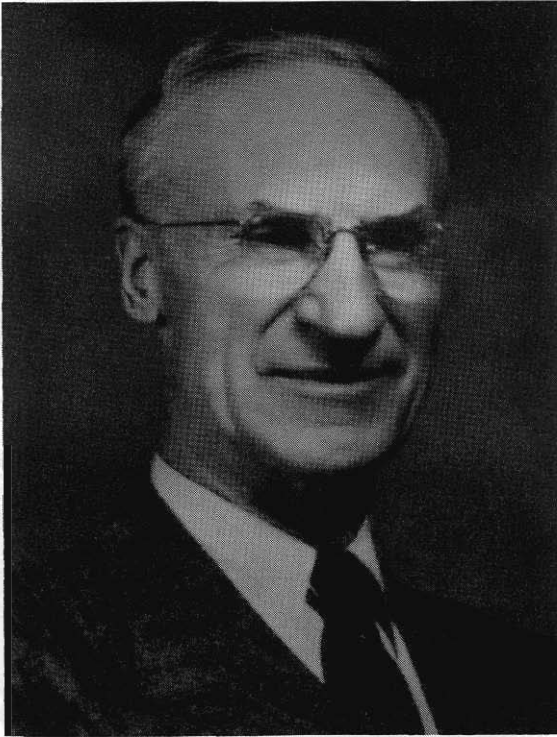
⁵⁶ *AI*, pp. 5-6, 18-25, 36-38.

⁵⁷ Richard Howard, "Latter Day Saint Scriptures and the Doctrine of Propositional Revelation," *Courage*, 1 (June, 1971), pp. 209-225; Snell to Merrill, March 26, 1949.

⁵⁸ This point and the methodological assumption implicit in it were pressed especially and consistently by Sidney Sperry. See Sidney Sperry, *The Voice of Israel's Prophets*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1952), and Sperry to Snell, August 31, 1949, HCS.

⁵⁹ Snell, "God in History," op.cit., p. 56.

⁶⁰ On the tension between historical research and religious faith the essential work is Van Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1966).



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