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# LETTERS

## *From a Born-Again Easterner*

As a recent "born-again" Easterner I was saddened to see *DIALOGUE* move west to the tops of the mountains. It's somewhat ironic to note your westward trek at a time when statistics show that LDS Church population is shifting eastward.

Notwithstanding the pangs of nostalgia over your shift in base of operations and new mailing address, I am pleased that *DIALOGUE* is still in business. I salute Mary Bradford and Lester Bush for their outstanding editorial leadership over the past six years and wish the new editorial team the best in its new challenges.

Please continue to look east for ongoing aid and inspiration as you promote outstanding art, literature and scholarship as well as leadership for other LDS and non Mormon publications.

Alf Pratte  
Shippensburg, Pennsylvania

## *Really Readable*

The summer issue of *DIALOGUE* calls for fan mail. I am very impressed with the letters section — really readable and free of fluff and slips.

The typographic design is also excellent. I like the larger size and uncrowded look of the letters — it goes with the new editorial approach. I think the bylines look great, and the unity of typestyle and respect for negative space give a feel and look of quality. I have heard you went through a lot to put this one together, but I have found remarkably few signs of the travail — in all it is a fine first issue by the Utah team.

Kevin G. Barnhurst  
Keene, New Hampshire

## *A Plague upon Your Computers*

I am one of those unworthies whose name was stricken from the rolls during the summer mailing. Consequently, I am without the knowledge and understanding available to so many of my peers.

I would appreciate receiving the Summer 1982 issues (vol. 15, no. 2) as soon as this can be arranged. Best wishes to you and a plague upon your computer.

Courtney J. Lassetter  
Saint Louis, Missouri

## *Joseph Smith's Methodism?*

I wish to correct a misunderstanding conveyed by a recent article in *DIALOGUE*. The discussion by Marvin S. Hill, "The First Vision Controversy, A Critical and Reconciliation" (Summer 1982), refers to a claim by anti-Mormons that Joseph Smith sought membership in the Methodist Church in 1828, contrary to instructions he reportedly received in the First Vision. This is incorrect. There is no evidence to support the argument that Joseph Smith ever seriously considered joining the Methodist Church.

The source for this anti-Mormon claim is the *Amboy Journal* (30 April and 11 June 1879), which contains statements by Joseph and Hiel Lewis, sons of the Rev. Nathaniel Lewis.

If we assume that these newspaper stories are reasonably accurate (they were made fifty-one years after the fact by individuals extremely hostile to the Church), then we may conclude that Joseph Smith attended the Methodist Church while residing in Harmony, Pennsylvania (between December 1827 and June 1829), and that his name was placed on the class book.

Once Joseph Lewis and Joshua McKune, members of the congregation, discovered this fact, Joseph Smith was informed that:

a character such as he was a disgrace to the church, that he could not be a member of the church unless he broke off his sins by repentance, made public confession, renounced his fraudulent and hypocritical practices, and gave some evidence that he intended to reform and conduct himself somewhat nearer like a christian than he had done. They gave him his choice, to go before the class, and publically ask to have his name stricken from the class book, or stand a disciplinary investigation. He chose the former, and immediately withdrew his name. So his name as a member of the class was on the book only three days. (*Amboy Journal*, 30 April 1879)

Several additional items should be noted about this event:

1. At the time (perhaps June 1828) Joseph was already translating the Book of Mormon. Martin Harris had begun work as his scribe in April 1828; the first 116 pages were translated by June 1828. Lucy Smith's letter to her sister-in-law, Mary Pierce, in January 1829, makes it clear that her son had been busy translating the Book of Mormon prior to that time. This letter also refers to persecution resulting from Joseph's work with the Book of Mormon.

2. Joseph Smith's wife, Emma, came from a staunch Methodist family. Emma's parents may have encouraged her to move back to Harmony in December 1827 in hopes that they could convince her she should not have married Joseph Smith because of his religious views. Furthermore, Emma's uncle, Nathaniel Lewis, was an influential Methodist preacher in Harmony and strenuously challenged the validity of Joseph Smith's religious claims (Erwin E. Wirkus, *Judge Me Dear Reader*, Las Vegas, Nev.: Ensign Publishers, 1978, pp. 21, 24; Larry C. Porter, "Reverend George Lane — Good 'Gifts,' Much 'Grace,' and Marked 'Usefulness,'" *BYU Studies*, Spring 1969, p. 332).

3. Joseph Smith's early history mentions a partiality for Methodism and a

"desire to be united with them." There is reason to believe that he may have been briefly associated with the Methodist Church as a member of the "probationary class" sometime near 1820 but withdrew from it very shortly later (Richard L. Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision Through Reminiscences," *BYU Studies*, Spring 1969, p. 384).

What all this suggests to me is that Joseph Smith simply went to a Methodist service in 1828, probably with his wife and her family, at which time his name was placed on the class roll book. There is no historical indication of inconsistency in Joseph Smith's behavior in this matter. He had his name withdrawn from the class book rather than deny his personal beliefs. In fact, even the *Amboy Journal* (30 April 1879) shows that Joseph was never serious about becoming a Methodist: "It was the general opinion that his only object in joining the Church was to bolster up his reputation, and gain sympathy and help of christians; that is, putting on the cloak of religion to serve the devil in."

If anything, this episode with the Methodist Church in Harmony only serves to further illustrate the severe persecution Joseph Smith encountered while remaining faithful to his own religious convictions. The bitter opposition to his efforts was so great that he was even prevented from attending other religious services — a fine demonstration of unchristianlike behavior on the part of the various ministers at that time.

A. Brent Merrill  
Berkeley, California

### *Hill Responds*

Thanks to A. Brent Merrill for clarifying a point in my piece on the First Vision. My comment was that in light of the absence of a divine command to join no church in the 1832 version it was no great inconsistency, as Rev. Walters has insisted, that Joseph sought to be a Methodist in

Harmony, Pennsylvania in 1828. Thus I pretty much agree with Merrill on this, that there is no historical indication of inconsistency in Joseph's behavior.

I am not sure that I agree, however, with Merrill's statement that "there is no evidence to support the argument that Joseph ever seriously considered joining the Methodist Church." There is actually quite a lot of evidence that he did so, probably as a teenager in Palmyra. Merrill himself cites some of it, including Joseph's own admission that "in the process of time my mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and I *felt some desire* to be united with them" (italics added). This sounds as though Joseph was serious. Pomeroy Tucker says that Joseph "at one time joined the probationary class of the Methodist Church in Palmyra, and made some *active demonstrations* of engagedness, though his assumed convictions were insufficiently grounded or abiding to carry him along to the saving point of conversion" (italics added). Due to his bias, Tucker did not want to think that Joseph was sincere, yet he indicates that he gave the appearance of being so. O. Turner says that Joseph caught a "spark of Methodism in a camp meeting"; Charles Brown says that Joseph acquired a "spark of Methodist fire" on the Vienna road and became an exhorter in the evening meetings. We have no indication here as to whether Joseph's interest was brief or otherwise, but Brown's comment that he was an exhorter at "meetings" suggests some length of time was involved.

The evidence in the *Amboy Journal* has Joseph seeking membership in Harmony in June 1828, thus for the second time in his life. Merrill tells us that the Lewises were bitterly anti-Mormon, yet takes their word that Joseph remained on the class roll only three days. The Lewises were doing their best to disclaim any significant connection between their church at Harmony and the Mormon prophet. Should we believe them? In the same source Michael B. Morse, Joseph's brother-in-law

(whom Mary Audentia Smith Anderson confirms was a teacher in the Methodist church at Harmony), maintained that Joseph's name was on the rolls as a probationer for six months but admits that Joseph never sought to become a full-fledged member. What was Joseph doing all this time? Again, I suspect that he was trying to please Emma and her family, who had close ties with the Methodists. Perhaps he was trying to make peace with Isaac Hale, on whose property he had recently come to reside. I agree with Merrill that all available evidence suggests Joseph's probationary activity was of a token sort and that he had no deep interest in Methodism in 1828. But if he had been commanded not to join a church, as the 1838 version reads, would he have gone even this far? The 1832 account spares us having to explain this point. In this account the Lord simply tells Joseph "none doeth good no not one they have turned aside from the Gospel." With no imperative to shun all churches, he was free in 1828 to become a Methodist probationer if he thought it best to do so. Keeping a roof over their heads and peace in the family to allow continued work on the Book of Mormon may have been sufficient motivation.

Marvin S. Hill  
Provo, Utah

### *What Is Official?*

Though I know several Mormon magazines of different format, DIALOGUE is among the best again. The entire spring 1982 edition is excellent, especially for anyone interested in Mormon history and theology. Well documented.

Sometimes I wondered at the frankness and honesty of some contributions, how delicate questions were addressed with utmost scholarly care. Sometimes I also wondered at the obvious gap between Mormon church leaders and scholars. Being a non-member, I now have a slight impression of the problems attached to finding out what

is "official," "authoritative," and "binding" in Mormonism.

My best congratulations to Mrs. Bradford and her staff for their excellent work, bringing *DIALOGUE* back to the top. I am looking forward to new editions under the new editors.

Heinz Platzer  
Vienna, Austria

### *New Direction Reproved?*

Among the footnotes in Hutchinson's article (Spring 1982, p. 121, n. 27) is a statement that Benjamin Urrutia "leaps upon a repointing of Gen. 1:1 based upon Joseph Smith's interpretations." This is simply not true. The repointing in question is based on the work of Dr. Ephraim Avigdor Speiser, specifically his 1964 translation for the Anchor Bible. Hutchinson adds that I do this "with no evaluation whatsoever of the demythologization at work in Gen. 1:1-2:4a and the profound montheism that it reflects." It seems that I am reproved for suggesting a new direction instead of being content with following the furrow others have plowed. If my theory is correct, the monotheism of the chapter in question may turn out to be a late and superficial phenomenon and not so "profound" as is usually assumed. In short, I did in my article what I intended.

Benjamin Urrutia  
Salt Lake City, Utah

### *Several Sacred Groves?*

Inspired by Marvin Hill's article (Summer 1982), I did a little reading in a book called *Varieties . . .* by someone named William James and found that in 1820, at the age of fourteen, one Stephen H. Bradley "saw the Saviour, by faith, in human shape" and another young man named David Brainerd said: "One morning while I was walking in a solitary place . . . attempting to pray . . . I thought that the

Spirit of God had quite left me. . . . but as I was walking in a thick grove, unspeakable glory seemed to open to the apprehension of my soul. . . . I had no particular apprehension of any one person in the Trinity, either Father, the Son, or the Holy Ghost."

The point of all this is twofold: God apparently appeared to several young men in those days, which should give us Mormons confidence that he probably appeared to young Joseph as well. And secondly, if David Brainerd couldn't tell if there were one, two, or three gods in *his* grove, why should anyone think it odd that Joseph couldn't remember either?

Rustin Kaufman  
Rexburg, Idaho

### *On the Mechanism of Translation*

Congratulations on your success in transferring the editorial offices of *DIALOGUE*! The articles in the most recent issue (Summer 1982) were well written and informative. I particularly enjoyed the article, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing.'" Van Wagoner and Walker have done more than I thought possible to clarify the relative roles of the ancient "interpreters" and the "seer stone."

However, I must quibble with the impression they leave on the mechanism of translation of the Book of Mormon. By omitting reference to one key document and by quoting without comment all the statements of David Whitmer, Martin Harris, and Joseph Knight, Sr., to the effect that, in translating, Joseph Smith would see "a line of characters from the plates, and under it, the translation in English," Van Wagoner and Walker perpetuate an old misconception.

This document was Section 8 of the 1833 Book of Commandments which appears unaltered as Section 9 of the current Doctrine and Covenants. Unlike other explanations of the translation process, this document was produced in April 1829 *dur-*

ing the work of translation. Oliver Cowdery had just tried to translate and had failed. It is clear that Oliver had shared the Whitmer-Harris-Knight misconception, for we read, "Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me" (v. 7). The process required considerably more mental effort than reading off English: "You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right. . . . Now, if you had known this you could have translated. . . ." (v. 8-10)

Precisely what "study it out" means, I don't profess to say, but it is important to understand that time and effort were required if one is now to understanding why, for example, Joseph Smith would opt to follow the available King James wording of the long Isaiah quotes in the Book of Mormon with only minor variations rather than to render a completely fresh translation. Only if one allows that Joseph Smith himself had to produce the English words, can one understand why so many ideas throughout the Book of Mormon are expressed in the familiar phrases and terminology of the King James New Testament. Finally, any claim that Joseph saw English would blame the Lord for all the grammatical errors in the first edition of the Book of Mormon.

Russell T. Pack  
Los Alamos, New Mexico

### "Home" Again

I picked up the Winter 1981 edition of *DIALOGUE* at a used bookstore in San Francisco. What took my eye? The article by Claudia R. Bushman — "Light and Dark Thoughts." I lived in the same neighborhood as Jean Lauper. I was well acquainted with the Laupers. Jean led the choir my husband sang in; Sergie Lauper was our stake president; my daughters were friends of her daughters. Jean gave a bridal shower for my daughter, Joy Matheson. We all knew what a perfectionist Jean Lauper was.

Each time I get homesick I reach for and read this article — then I am "home" again for awhile.

Ora Matheson  
Campbell, California

### Winter Thoughts

I just rediscovered my Winter 1981 women's issue on my shelves.

I was intrigued by the letters responding to Sandy Straubhaar's review of Orson Scott Card's book, *A Planet Called Treason*. I have a peculiar fondness for Brother Card. As my Sunday School teacher during a particularly bleak period of my life, his mildly irreverent quips and alternative religious views shocked me, delighted me, and highlighted my then-wobbly existence. In his class my slumbering intellect stirred, like some long-forgotten, hibernating bear quivering in a dream of half-remembered honey bees on a summer's day. My own impression of Ms. Staubhaar's review is that she missed the boat. I did not find Card's book offensive. I rather agree with Gary P. Gillum who found it a satirical comment on our society, and one that is much more true-to-life than we feel comfortable with.

Judith McConkie's work was interesting, delightful, and sometimes poignant. Her *Pyracantha* moved me as no other piece of art has ever done.

Claudia Bushman's observations on death in "Light and Dark Thoughts" were both stark and beautiful. Although dead bodies are generally considered gruesome and repulsive, participating in death rituals helps us to say good-bye and to let go. I appreciated very much the author's forthrightness in dealing with a generally taboo subject.

The only off-note in the issue for me was struck by Maureen Beecher's "Birthing." I was so appalled by the bellowing nurses, "white-suited mob of unknown faces," wires and tubes linking her to a mysterious bank of machines, and the "impersonal white sterility" of the hospital that

I found myself unable to agree with her that she had "known it all," experienced the full sisterhood and meaning of what it is to give birth. It is a tribute to the intensity of the experience that she could feel she had done so, but I protest her implication that the externals of the experience (whether in hospital or hogan) make no difference to the internal experience. I sincerely hope that the details surrounding the birth of her child are not typical of the experiences of today's women and babies.

I look forward to future issues!

Laury Mitchell  
Fayetteville, Arkansas

### *Archaeology Symposium*

The Thirty-second Annual Symposium on the Archaeology of the Scriptures will be held at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, 22 October 1983. Participants will include Dr. Raphael Patai and Elder Howard W. Hunter. Dr. Clark Knowlton, Dept. of Sociology, University of Utah, SLC, Utah 84112, is now accepting abstracts of proposed papers.