

Beyond Literalism

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Mormonism has, in my view, a serious theological problem with its understanding of scripture. The problem lies in the tendency to read the scriptures uncritically, and it exists in both the LDS and RLDS traditions. We tend to assume that all that is contained in scripture is true, represents God's mind and will, and has universal application through time and space. Often we assume that the words of scripture are literally the words of God. "The Lord has said . . ." becomes an appropriate introduction to any scriptural quotation. The scriptures are treated as though they are a collection of statements of equal value, no matter when they were written, by whom, where, or for what purpose. We tend, in short, to see all extracts from the scriptural canon as consistent and true. Thomas G. Alexander extends this assumption of consistency to church doctrine in general: "Perhaps the main barrier to understanding the development of Mormon theology is an underlying assumption by most Church members that there is a cumulative unity of doctrine" (1980, 24).

When we hold this view, we are tempted to proof text, stringing together a succession of quotations from various scriptures. By this method, a person can support almost any doctrinal belief since it does not require the user to evaluate the passage in context or accommodate other scriptures, perhaps even from other parts of the works cited, which may support another conclusion. This uncritical, literal understanding of the Bible produces many misinterpretations, which sometimes can be harmful or even absurd. To cite an example from another denomination, a recent Southern Baptist Convention opposed the ordination of women on the ground that women are subservient, due to their supposed responsibility for bringing sin into the world (UPI 1984).

The explanation for the Mormon tradition of using the Bible uncritically and literally lies in our history. The authority of the Bible was an important issue in American Protestantism at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

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Orthodox Christians felt threatened by the Enlightenment position that rational discussion and empirical verification were the final tests of religious claims. By this view, the Bible contained a great deal of superstition. Part I of Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*, published in 1794, contained what was perhaps the best-known criticism of the Bible in that period.

Orthodox Christians countered by terming skeptics "infidels" and urging that the faithful be prepared to answer them. The Bible was an important source of authority for orthodox Christians, partly because certain other traditional sources of authority had been eliminated. The American Revolution had overthrown the king, who was the head of the Church of England. Some of the state constitutions and the federal constitution eliminated or forbade established churches — another traditional source of authority (T. Smith 1980).

As Joseph Smith grew to manhood he was apparently aware of the challenge to orthodox Christianity presented by religious skepticism. If he had not read Paine's *Age of Reason*, he was probably aware of Paine's criticisms of Christianity, perhaps from his grandfather. Hullinger (1980) argues that both the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's "new translation" of the Bible may have been, in part, a response to Paine's attack. The Book of Mormon, for instance, answered Paine's charge that Christianity is based on a revelation given to a few people long ago and far away, with the rest of us being expected to accept it on hearsay (Paine 1794, 5–6). Paine, along with Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Priestly, also charged that Jesus' plain, ethical gospel had been distorted by the Christian church which had "set up a religion of pomp and of revenue, in pretended imitation of a person whose life was humility and poverty" (Paine 1794, 22; see Boorstin 1948, 151–66). The Book of Mormon also contains this view, and Joseph's "new translation" attempted to remedy the presumed corruption of the biblical text.¹

Thus, it seems probable that Joseph Smith was aware of some of the biblical issues that had been raised during his father's generation by representatives of the Enlightenment. I believe that his scriptures contain and reflect that perspective. However, Joseph would not have been aware of the issues raised by the "higher criticism" of the Bible.² Even though this new biblical scholarship

¹ The Book of Mormon held that when the Bible was in the hands of "the great and abominable church" (presumably the medieval Catholic Church), there were "many plain and precious things taken away from the Book, which is the Book of the Lamb of God" (J. Smith 1830, 30). Therefore Joseph Smith regarded the King James Version as inadequate. Later Joseph is quoted as saying: "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" (HC 6:57). The Wentworth letter, now the eighth Article of Faith, also made the assertion: "We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly" (*Times and Seasons* 3 (1 March 1942): 709).

While these statements can be cited to show the need to correct the King James Version, they also imply that the biblical writings, in their original form, are to be fully believed. Joseph felt the problems were not with the original text, but with translation and transmission, and clergy with evil intent.

² I am aware of no evidence that Joseph knew of higher criticism; we can only speculate as to what his response would have been. Russel B. Swensen (1972, 38) and Heber C. Snell (1967, 61) have argued that Smith would have responded favorably, pointing out that he

was already in operation in the German universities in Joseph's lifetime, it was not extensively disseminated in the United States until after his death. This new approach to scripture went beyond the general skepticism of the rationalistic challenge of the Age of Enlightenment. The new critics challenged long-held traditions as to the authorship, date, and purpose of various biblical writings. For example, they concluded that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, but rather by several authors, centuries after Moses' death. They suggested naturalistic explanations for the miracle stories, assumed Jesus was human rather than divine, and noted conflicts within the Bible, undermining the assumption of internal consistency in the book.³

Here are a few examples of these internal inconsistencies:

1. There are two creation accounts in Genesis — the Yahwist account in chapter 2, and the Priestly account in chapter 1. They are quite different in style, content, approach, and concerns.
2. The Deuteronomic history in the Old Testament assumes that the reward for faithfulness to Yahweh is long life, good health, numerous posterity, and material prosperity. The book of Job strongly challenges this assumption.
3. The book of Ezra forbids marrying foreigners, yet the book of Ruth indicates that King David himself was the product of a mixed marriage, having a Moabite great-grandmother.

was independent minded, that he recognized the inadequacies of the King James Version, and his personal interest in biblical studies and languages led him to hire Rabbi Joseph Seixas to teach Hebrew to the School of the Prophets. On the other hand, Sidney B. Sperry (1967, 75) assumed that Smith would have opposed higher criticism because many of his statements and revelations were in conflict with this new scholarship. It seems at least possible to me that had Smith lived in a later generation and had access to higher criticism, his revelations and other pronouncements may not have taken a literal approach to the Bible. He would have considered questions that did not occur to him in the 1830s and that would have been reflected in his prophetic utterances.

³ If the reader would like more information on the history and nature of higher criticism, one might begin with various articles in *The Interpreter's Bible* and *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, published by Abingdon Press in Nashville: Samuel Terrien, "History of the Interpretation of the Bible: Modern Period," *IB*, I (1952): 127-41; Kendrick Grobel, "Biblical Criticism," *IDB* I (1962): 407-13; Simon J. De Vries, "History of Biblical Criticism," *IDB* I (1962): 413-18; Elizabeth Achtemeier, "History of Interpretation: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Christian," *IDB Suppl.* (1976): 455-56; Henri Cazelles, "Biblical Criticism, OT," *IDB Suppl.* (1976): 98-102; Howard Clark Kee, "Biblical Criticism, NT," *IDB Suppl.* (1976): 102-04. See also Alan Richardson, "The Rise of Modern Biblical Scholarship and the Recent Discussion of the Authorship of the Bible," in S. L. Greenslade, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), 3:294-338. For lengthier discussions of the history of higher criticism one might consult Ronald E. Clements, *One Hundred Years of Old Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976) and W. G. Kummel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972). For a study of the early rumblings of higher criticism in America see Jerry Wayne Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800-1870: The New England Scholars* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1969). The movement was little noticed in the United States, however, until the late nineteenth century. An excellent article on this period is Ira V. Brown, "The Higher Criticism Comes to America, 1800-1900," *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 38 (December 1960), 193-212. For a brief, concise book discussing the historical-critical approach to the study of the Bible, see Edgar Krentz, *The Historical Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

4. The birth stories in Matthew and Luke differ in several details, though not all of these details are contradictory.⁴

5. Matthew and Luke, copying Mark, make numerous alterations in his account (Russell 1982, n. 27).

6. The Gospel of John is markedly different from the three synoptic gospels and has almost no points of contact with the other three gospels prior to Holy Week. It is useless to try to harmonize the four gospels or arrange them in chronological order as one account, although David H. Yarn (1962) bravely attempted the feat and Talmage (1915) also takes the same approach.

7. In Matthew 27:5, Judas Iscariot dies by hanging himself, while in Acts 1:18, his death comes as a result of a disemboweling fall.

8. The information about Paul and the early Christian church as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles differs significantly from that in Paul's own letters (Sandmel 1958).

9. Finally, the dualistic world view of the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation is quite contrary to the world view found in the rest of the Old Testament and in the Gospel of John. Most scholars find it improbable that the same person could have written John and Revelation.⁵

These examples illustrate the kind of challenges that higher criticism presented to those who held a literal view of the Bible and assumed its internal consistency, including Joseph Smith. Quite naturally, many if not most Christians opposed higher criticism because it seemed to undermine the authority of the Bible. It was inherently more threatening to Protestantism than to Catholicism, since the Protestant Reformation had rejected tradition, including the pope, as a source of authority, while exalting the Bible as the sole authority for faith.

Quite naturally, higher criticism generated counter-attacks. The most significant scholarly critique in America was called the Princeton Theology. It was developed originally by Archibald Alexander (1772-1851) who founded the seminary at Princeton in 1812 and was carried forward by Charles Hodge, Benjamin B. Warfield, A. A. Hodge, and others (Sandeel 1970; Ahlstrom 1972, 462, 813-14; Marty 1984, 303-4). Unfortunately, their central argument was that the Bible is without error. In a classic statement of their position in the *Presbyterian Review* (1881), A. A. Hodge and Warfield wrote that

⁴ Beare (1962) mentions these: 1. In Matthew, the Annunciation is made to Joseph in a dream while in Luke it is made to Mary awake. 2. In Matthew, Joseph finds Mary pregnant and is inclined to break the engagement until he is told in a dream that the Holy Spirit is the agent of conception, while in Luke Joseph is present but expresses no concern. 3. Matthew tells the story of the Magi but not the shepherds, while in Luke it is the reverse. 4. Matthew assumes that Bethlehem was the home of Joseph and Mary. After the flight into Egypt, they return to Nazareth because of another dream. In Luke, Nazareth is the home of Joseph and Mary. They go to Bethlehem for the census, and then to Jerusalem (apparently not feeling threatened by Herod) to present Jesus in the temple. 6. Matthew alone explains the significance of the name of Jesus. 7. The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew differs from that found in Luke.

⁵ As early as the third century, the linguistic and stylistic differences between Revelation and the Gospel of John led Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria to conclude that they both could not have been written by the same author. Luther and other Reformers had similar doubts. In modern times this conclusion "has been firmly established" (Kümmel 1975, 471).

“the historical faith of the Church has always been, that all the affirmations of Scripture of all kinds, whether of spiritual doctrine or duty, or of physical or historical fact, or of psychological or philosophical principle, are without error” (Smith, Handy, and Loetscher 2:332).

As the Princeton theologians became aware of the difficulty in reconciling apparent conflicts in the biblical text, they contended that errors and inconsistencies would not appear if we were dealing with uncorrupted “original autographs.” Sandeen feels that the “autograph” argument developed as a result of the growing threat of biblical criticism. It does not appear in A. A. Hodge’s first edition of *Outlines of Theology* (1860) but does appear in his second edition, nineteen years later (1970, 128, 130).

Perhaps the promulgation of the dogma of papal infallibility by the Catholic Church in 1870 was in part a response to the challenges of higher criticism. Princeton theologians, in contrast, insisted on the ultimate authority of the Bible: “God could not, would not, convey truth through an errant document” (Sandeen 1970, 130). Therefore, God guided the process so that the writings would be free from error. As stated in the Hodge-Warfield article, this occurred through a process of “divine superintendence.” This supervision “extended to the verbal expression of the thoughts of the sacred writers, as well as to the thoughts themselves, and that, hence, the Bible considered as a record, an utterance in words of a divine revelation, is the Word of God to us. Hence, in all the affirmations of Scripture of every kind, there is no more error in the words of the original autographs than in the thoughts they were chosen to express” (Smith, Handy, and Loetscher 2:328).

One cannot help but wonder why the very God who protected the process of writing withdrew his watch care during the translation and transmission process. The Princeton position seems to be a retreat from the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterian faith which held that by God’s “singular care and providence” the scriptures have been “kept pure in all ages” (Harden 1968, 128). Joseph Smith’s position — that the Bible is correct “as far as it is translated correctly” — seems very close to the “original autographs” theory of A. A. Hodge.

From the Princeton theology and other sources would eventually emerge twentieth-century fundamentalism. According to Oxford biblical scholar James Barr:

Fundamentalism begins when people begin to say that the doctrinal and practical authority of scripture is necessarily tied to its infallibility and in particular its historical inerrancy, when they maintain that its doctrinal and practical authority will stand up *only* if it is in general without error, and this means in particular only if it is without error in its apparently historical remarks. The centre of fundamentalism is the insistence that the control of doctrine and practice by scripture is dependent on something like a general perfection of scripture, and therefore on its historical inerrancy; and this in turn involves the repudiation of the results of modern critical modes of reading the Bible (1980, 65–66; 1978).

Many Mormons in both the LDS and RLDS traditions would feel comfortable with this description of their own attitudes toward scripture. I feel that

this "pre-critical" view of the Bible comes to us from Joseph Smith's own attitudes (Snell 1967, 61). He couched his revelations in terms that assumed the common understanding of the Bible in his time and place, not aware that biblical scholarship would soon call these traditions into serious question. Thus he and his fellow Mormons operated with an uncritical, literal understanding of the Bible. Zebedee Coltrin recalled that on one occasion, when some elders undertook to correct the grammar in a revelation Joseph had just uttered, he rebuked them, saying that every word had been dictated by Jesus Christ (Hill 1977, 141). Presumably, he applied the same process to the production of other scriptures as well. Gordon Irving, in an excellent article analyzing the use of the Bible in Mormon publications from 1832 to 1838, observed that the saints understood the Bible literally. They assumed that the meaning of the biblical writings was clear and consistent. The historical accounts were accurate, and the prophecies were to be fulfilled exactly as written, often finding their fulfillment in the 19th century. The early Mormons believed that the average person could readily understand and apply the biblical passages. Irving also notes that the Book of Mormon and the revelations of Joseph Smith supported a literal interpretation of the scriptures (1973, 476-77, 487).

Obviously, this early identification with a literal tradition that has continued to our day imposes limitations on alternative views of scripture. When we consider issues in biblical scholarship which point to a non-literal conception of the nature of scripture, the prophetic mission of Joseph Smith may appear to be in jeopardy. The problem lies in the fact that it does not occur to us that a prophet's canonical utterances are limited by his humanity and by the culture of which he is a part. With this pre-critical understanding of the Bible, the more modern view based on biblical scholarship seems to be a rejection of Joseph Smith. Thus there is a strong tendency to reject biblical scholarship. Joseph Fielding Smith put it well in 1931: "The Latter-day Saints are not bound to receive the theories of men when they do not accord with the word of the Lord to them" (Sherlock 1980, 68-69). In a similar vein, Sidney Sperry, himself a graduate of a Protestant seminary, once attacked the position of his less traditional colleague, Heber C. Snell: "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" (1967, 75). Thus, it seems we have a forced choice between the biblical scholars and the prophets. But can the matter be settled so easily?

In the late nineteenth century and through most of the twentieth century, the RLDS Church was essentially unfriendly to modern biblical scholarship. The literal approach, assuming internal consistency, was the dominant understanding of the scriptures (Russell 1985; Ham 1985). While the church leadership in the last half of the twentieth century has been moving away from the literal conception of scripture, many rank-and-file members remain literalists. The strength of the literal tradition is illustrated by the vocal protest movements that have arisen in the past fifteen years, challenging the liberal direction the RLDS Church has taken. Many other RLDS members who do not support the protest movement nevertheless remain troubled by the changes in the

church. This tension between fundamentalists and liberals in the RLDS Church has created real confusion as to the nature and identity of the RLDS Church (Conrad and Shupe 1985).

In the LDS Church, modern biblical scholarship also has not been very well received. The pattern of biblical exegesis used by Joseph Smith and his followers has consistently been, according to Snell, "to quote scripture and interpret it without regard to the historical milieu in which it arose" (1967, 60). Snell also cites the sermons in the *Journal of Discourses*, Parley P. Pratt's *Voice of Warning*, B. H. Roberts's *The Gospel*, James E. Talmage's *The Article of Faith*, Joseph Fielding Smith's *The Way to Perfection*, and Milton Hunter's *The Gospel Through the Ages*. "Numerous examples of 'proof texts' and their application could be cited from them and other Church writings," he concludes. "One will rarely hear, in a Latter-day Saint assembly for worship or instruction, any departure from the traditional method. This is true, in lesser measure, in the Seminaries and Institutes of the Church. It is as if the modern study of the Bible, though literary, historical, and archeological approaches, had never been heard of" (1967, 60). More recently Norman has written of a growing anti-scholarly interpretation of the scriptures in the Church (1981, 132), and Sterling M. McMurrin has stated that "Mormons even today are in general the victims of traditional patterns of biblical thought that often tie them to an outworn and intellectually frustrating scriptural literalism" (Roberts 1985, xxiv-xxv).

At one point in the early twentieth century, some Latter-day Saints manifested interest in higher criticism. William H. Chamberlin (1870-1921), who taught at Brigham Young University from 1910 to 1916, was apparently the first LDS teacher to make extensive use of the historical method in teaching the Bible but left BYU because of strong pressure to abandon this method (Bergera and Priddis 1985, 135-148). Sidney Sperry, the first Mormon to get a doctorate in a divinity school, taught Old Testament at BYU from 1932 until his retirement in 1970 but represented an acceptable position which subordinated biblical scholarship to the word of the prophet.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, several Mormons were encouraged by Church leaders to attend the University of Chicago Divinity School (Bergera and Priddis 1985, 53). This encouragement had stopped by the mid-1930s, at least in part, suggests Swensen, because "many general authorities of the Church were fearful that the sociological, historical, and literary approach to Bible studies plus the liberal spirit of the [University of Chicago] Divinity School would undermine the faith and loyalty of L.D.S. students who went there to study" (1967, 45; see also Bergera and Priddis 1985, 63).

The uncritical, literal approach is still very strong in both churches. Modern biblical scholarship is not taken seriously by very many members. In the RLDS Church it is most noticeable in the public dissent of literalists disenchanted with the leadership. And frequently the most liberal church members, while accepting biblical scholarship, nevertheless don't take it very seriously. It is noteworthy that the RLDS Church has not produced an Old Testament survey for adult study.

In the LDS Church, the opposition to modern biblical scholarship is often seen in official kinds of sources. For example, BYU philosophy professor David Yarn, in examining "wisdom" in the Bible (1972), simply gathered all of the uses of the word and drew a composite conclusion about what it means, treating the Bible as though it were one long work by a single author. He made no effort to interpret a passage in the context of the particular book in which it is found; and most surprisingly, he showed no awareness of the scholarly studies of the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East and of the Hebrew Bible.⁶

Victor Ludlow's *Unlocking the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981) makes no attempt to organize the books in any logical order, such as the sequence of their composition. He assumes that Moses wrote Genesis and that Eve was created from Adam's rib. He does not acknowledge the two creation accounts in Genesis, does not mention that Ruth runs counter to Ezra-Nehemiah, downplays the religious pessimism of Ecclesiastes, ignores the sexual component of Esther, fails to acknowledge the fiery message of social justice in Amos, and does not discuss the Second Isaiah issue or the difference in setting after Chapter 40.

Glen L. Pearson, in *The Old Testament: A Mormon Perspective* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), believes that the higher critics undermine faith: "Apostasy and infidelity follow them wherever they go" (p. 13). In her review, of this book, Melodie Moench Charles writes: "Pearson implies that any Mormon armed with a testimony, a Pearl of Great Price, and a Book of Mormon can understand the Old Testament better than any secular scholar can" (1982, 123). Another example of the uncritical, literal approach is Monte S. Nyman, *Great Are the Words of Isaiah* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1981). Richard L. Anderson's *Understanding Paul* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), is more scholarly but nevertheless brushes aside rather casually some of the key problems of modern biblical scholarship.

Student manuals for Bible courses at Brigham Young University are a collection of statements from General Authorities, church literature, and the standard works which are presumed to settle the question addressed (CES, 1979-82). Most of the major issues in biblical scholarship are simply ignored. Very few biblical scholars are quoted or even listed in the bibliography. The student manuals teach more about modern Mormonism than they do about the Bible.

Traditional Mormons in both LDS and RLDS traditions tend to regard the utterances of prophets or other producers of canonical writings as radically different in kind from other writings, such as those of the biblical scholars. A good example is a comment by Hugh Nibley's associate, Curtis Wright:

I reject in principle the academic criticism of prophets. There is something wrong with the football player who criticizes the play of basketball on the basis of the only rules he knows, especially if he believes into the bargain that football is the only game

⁶ On the wisdom literature see, for example, R. B. Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1971) or Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972). For a briefer treatment see the chapters on the wisdom literature in any scholarly survey of the Old Testament.

in existence. I can't bring myself to criticize a prophet for any utterance, no matter how foolish or profound, on the basis of academic rules. I don't always agree with everything the prophets say, but they are free to say anything they like without opposition from me (Nibley 1979, 23).

Wright thus suggests that the scriptures — and indeed, any utterances of latter-day prophets — are beyond the purview of the theologian, historian, sociologist or literary critic. I suggest that we move beyond that kind of attitude, recognizing that the authors of holy writ, including modern prophets, have all been human and products of their environment, even when inspired. As Robert Mesle has stated: "Persons, texts, communities, and institutions are all creatures of history" (1984, 12). We must not abandon our ability to reason when we examine the scriptures or the statements of church leaders.

Let me give an example how historical circumstances condition our understanding of scripture. Living in America more than a century after the Civil War, it is easy for us to conclude that slavery was an evil that needed to be abolished. We might even apply the biblical faith that God is at work in history and conclude that God was at work in the process of ending slavery, draw parallels to the Israelites in slavery in Egypt, and conclude that those who assisted runaway slaves were doing the work of God, as were the slaves themselves in running away. But if we were white Southerners prior to the Civil War, we would probably have regarded slavery as sanctioned by the Bible, and therefore by God himself. We would note that Paul returned the runaway slave Onesimus (Philemon), and that in Ephesians 6:5 he admonished: "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters." We might regard runaways and abolitionists as evil people acting contrary to God's revealed will.

Joseph Smith lived prior to the Civil War, although not in the South. During most of his career, he seems to have accepted the institution of slavery. But who of us does not assume that the Prophet would have had a different view of slavery had he lived after the Civil War. And that his view would be reflected in his utterances, which we would revere because of his status as our prophet?

It seems likely to me that Joseph Smith's adoption of polygamy was conditioned by his pre-critical approach to the Bible. Noticing that great dignitaries in the Old Testament were polygamous and not seeing any divine sanctions expressed by biblical writers, he may have decided to "restore" an ancient practice since he assumed the scriptures were consistent and equally applicable today.

Assertions that we should choose the word of the Lord over the word of men (the biblical scholars) are not very useful. Who wouldn't choose the word of God to the word of men? But we cannot assume that something represents the mind and will of God simply because it is contained in the scriptures or was uttered by a prophet or one of the General Authorities. Furthermore, cannot the work of scholars be inspired? There simply is no sure way to distinguish between the word of God and the words of men — or to distinguish between what is inspired and what is not. As Snell observed:

Every biblical book is the product of some human mind, or minds, activated variously by the Divine Spirit and reacting to a certain environment. It follows that the more

one knows about the writer and his milieu the better one is prepared to uncover the meaning of his book. It may be said, indeed, that without this knowledge the message of the ancient text will remain more or less hidden (1967, 63).

In short, we need biblical scholarship to help us better understand the scriptures. Why not see them in a cooperative rather than in a conflicted relationship?

Scriptural fundamentalists who say that if we take scholarship seriously we "trust in the arm of flesh" (or in the "words of men") seem to be guilty of the very accusation they make of others. The scriptures are, to a certain extent, the "words of men."

Only God is holy. No writing, person, or institution is holy except as it points beyond itself to the divine. The authority of the Bible lies not in its perfection, but in its life-changing power to direct us to God. The New Testament, for example, has a special authority because it contains the documents closest to Jesus of Nazareth. The authors' proximity to the Christ-event gives their testimony a particular authority that later writers cannot match, a testimony that draws men and women to Christ as no other writings have done. Similarly, the Old Testament contains the documents considered authoritative by the community out of which Christianity arose. Thus the Old Testament is important for understanding early Christianity, and it too has been a source of inspiration for many people.

The Book of Mormon has authority for Latter-day Saints because it is the founding document of Mormonism and has drawn many converts to the Church. For them it is "the keystone of our religion" (HC 1:461). For me, its authority stems from containing the thought of the founding prophet just prior to the organization of the Church. Mormon doctrine in both churches has evolved considerably beyond the Book of Mormon, in ways not always consistent with the founding document. Joseph's statement that "a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book" (HC 1:461) has proven true for many — but not all — Mormons then and now.

Similarly, the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price have particular authority because they contain documents which the founding prophet considered to be the will of God. Even if we may think some of these revelations — or parts thereof — do not represent the will of God, I see no reason why they should not have an authority for Mormons roughly equal to the authority the Bible has for all Christians.

We need to learn the value of critical scholarship about the scriptures. Through careful scholarly examination, we can gain a fuller grasp of the meaning of the scriptures, thereby maximizing their authority for us. It is my hope that some day soon, biblical scholarship will flourish in the two Mormon churches.

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