

Book of Mormon Stories That My Teachers Kept from Me

Neal Chandler

I AM ABOUT TO MAKE a confession — not to my bishop who does not read *DIALOGUE* and who would probably not want to hear it anyway, but to you who as *DIALOGUE* readers are surely more at ease with scandal. I would like to keep the exercise simple, but for the sake of honesty — and what is confession without honesty? — I'm going to undermine my confession by admitting right up front that I am about to do this right thing for a wrong reason. The right reasons for confession, according to tradition and the *Bishop's Handbook*, are a contrite spirit and the desire to repent. But I have searched my heart in this matter and found no particular pang, no ache of regret. In fact, it may be no more than a kind of perversity that brings me to admit what I will tell you now, namely, that when it comes to the Book of Mormon, that most correct of books, whose pedigree we love passionately to debate and whose very namesakes we have, all of us, become, I stand mostly with Mark Twain. I think it's "chloroform in print."¹

I am guilty of this impiety, but I am not, I think, utterly incorrigible. I do not, for instance, stand with Karl Marx who insisted "the

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¹ This famous phrase occurs in the sixteenth chapter of *Roughing It* and is only a small part of Twain's puzzlement over Mormonism. "The book is a curiosity to me, it is such a pretentious affair, and yet so 'slow,' so sleepy; such an insipid mess of inspiration. It is chloroform in print. If Joseph Smith composed this book, the act was a miracle — keeping awake while he did it was, at any rate. If he, according to tradition, merely translated it from certain ancient and mysteriously-engraved plates . . . , the work of translating was equally a miracle, for the same reasons" (1872, 127). Twain was not a believer, but unlike many believers — and as the long book review which follows clearly shows — he at least had read the Book of Mormon.

Mormon Bible" was as difficult to understand as Prussian foreign policy, precisely because there wasn't a word of sense in either (Marx 1864). On the contrary, I find the Book of Mormon relentlessly long on good sense; but if good sense were also relentlessly engaging, you and I would watch our weight instead of television, our adolescent children would hang hungrily on our every word of sage advice, and we would, all of us, stay awake when high councilmen come to speak. We do not.

Perhaps, my problems with the Book of Mormon are my own fault. Perhaps I have simply read 1 Nephi too many times. But it is not just this repetition that wearies. 1 Nephi has its low points, but also hills, and rills, and some exotic vegetation along the way. No, it is not until the dry, open expanses of Nephi 2 that my eyelids and attention flag in defiance of my good resolve. If reading scripture is, indeed, like a journey home, then for me who have often made that long trek across Interstate 80 to my Utah birthplace, 2 Nephi looms enroute like . . . Nebraska . . . a sort of sub-Saharan Nebraska with miles and miles and desolate miles of nothing but more miles and miles, all of which must be faced with the terrible and certain foreknowledge that at the inconceivably distant conclusion of Nebraska, Wyoming lies in wait.

Oh, I do not deny that there are majestic moments, vistas of theological grandeur even in 2 Nephi. "For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things" (2 Ne. 2:11), for instance, or "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Ne. 2:25). I also value Nephi's psalm, not because it is great literature, as some contend, but because it seems so unlike Nephi. Still, these passages are brief oases in a vast and level plain of exhortation and prophecy, prophecy and exhortation. There are, at the outset, Lehi's exhortations to his wayward children and his prophecies, followed by the prophecies and exhortations of Jacob, which in turn incorporate the exhortations and prophecies of Isaiah, to be followed by the interpretations, prophecies, and exhortations of Nephi. Jacob then denounces the wicked, exhorts the righteous, and expounds at length the allegory of the olive tree for purposes both of exhortation and of prophecy.

Next, there is a reprieve of sorts. Enos gives us the world's briefest account of the world's longest prayer, and for those of us familiar with the history and practice of long-distance praying, this is surely a good thing. I must point out, however, that its virtue derives as much from what, mercifully, the account leaves out, as from what it contains. In any case, shortly thereafter King Benjamin, who is, incidentally, my favorite Book of Mormon exhorter, exhorts from his tower for several long chapters—without neglecting prophecy. Even 3 Nephi, to whose

familiar language and central testimony we quickly direct newcomers to the book, is not so much a narrative as a kind of grand first general conference report in which the life mission of Jesus of Nazareth, with its human contexts and conflicts, its personalities and parables, its trials and ambiguities and quiet human moments, is condensed—I want to say reduced—to conference talks replete with doctrines, prophecies, and, of course, exhortations.

Now I do not mean to suggest for a moment that doctrines, prophecies, exhortations, and/or conference talks are not good things. I suppose the Second Coming will be brought to us on television, and who can doubt what the format will be? Still, as a steady diet, the familiar format requires a pious asceticism not given me in more than measured doses. I am a restless exhortee. After a while I begin to watch my watch, roll my eyes, count again the remaining minutes or pages, hope for a commercial. It is not because I don't appreciate gospel principles; it is only because those principles unleavened, unamended, and uncomplicated by life itself or by stories of real living seem to me about as compelling as would grammar in a world without language.

When Jesus of Nazareth was asked, as he often was, some question turning on what everyone around him thought to be high, implacable principle, he did not quote from *Mormon Doctrine* nor from *Answers to Gospel Questions*. Instead, he told a story. And we, who have never very well understood why he did this, have ourselves long since lost the skill of storytelling. Jesus' stories to his first audiences were unheard of, striking, disquieting, unorthodox. To us, however, they—like our own stories for pulpit, classroom, and *official* publication—have become the very soul of orthodoxy; we know the central ones by heart, and because we know them so well, we hardly know them at all. They are, to borrow a simile from Nietzsche, like coins so long in use they have lost their imprimatur and circulate among us as smooth blank metal. We know they are a unit of value, but no longer remember clearly what that value is.

Who among us does not know the story of the good Samaritan? Once a man on his way from Jerusalem down to Jericho fell into the hands of thieves, who stripped him, beat him, then left him for dead. By chance a priest came that way and, seeing him along the road, passed by on the other side. Then a Levite came by, saw him, and likewise passed by. But when a traveling Samaritan came upon the injured man, he was moved to pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, bathing them with oil and wine. Then he lifted him onto his donkey and took him to an inn, where he nursed him. The next morning he gave the innkeeper some money, charging him to take care of

the man and promising on his return trip to pay any extra expenses. Then he went on his way.

Whenever I have asked for volunteers to recount that story, there have been numerous applicants to choose from. What's more, whoever was called upon told it confidently and comprehensively without reminder or hesitation. Afterward I have asked questions, and we have done what good Sunday School classes always do. We have carefully noted that the first man to pass by the victim on the roadside was, in fact, an official of the Jewish faith, and that the second, the Levite, was an even higher, aristocratically certified, religious official. And, finally, that the man who actually stopped to help, who went out of his way and out of pocket to care for the injured Jew, belonged to an ethnic group commonly despised by Jews. This, of course, is the cultural information most crucial to understanding the question which Jesus puts at the end of the story: "Which of these three men," he asks, "was neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?" (Luke 10:36). And yet, even carefully analyzed and placed into context, our tellings are a far cry from the parable as it was first told and intended. Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew, told his story *to* the Jews. We tell it—and, I think, rather *like* to tell it—*on* the Jews.

The truth is that in order to be faithful to a story, sometimes it is necessary to be not quite so faithful to the text. I am not a Jew in ancient Israel. I am a late twentieth-century Mormon living in Cleveland, Ohio, where, one might, for instance, speculate, there was once a certain man who on a Saturday evening went into a part of the city into which respectable men normally do not go. Why he went there has not been determined, though this is a matter of concern to many among us who think his reason makes all the difference in the world. Still, whatever the reason, his trip ended in misfortune. He was attacked by thugs who took his money and credit cards, his dark blue blazer, and his late model car with the George Bush bumper sticker. They left him beaten and filthy and unconscious in the gutter. And then by chance a certain high priest drove by, a former Mormon bishop and member of the stake high council, who was taking a short cut through that part of town because he was late for the priesthood session of stake conference. And when he saw the man lying in the gutter, he shook his head and said to himself with not a little disgust, "Look at that, would you. Just look at that. The things people do to themselves." And because there were other men, black men, standing on the sidewalk staring at him, he pulled into the center lane and, accelerating, ran a yellow light at the next intersection.

Not long after, there also came that way a General Authority, traveling from the airport in a very large car. He was a well-known official

from a well-known family, and when he saw the man in the gutter, he too was troubled, though in a different sort of way, and asked, "Shouldn't we stop to help?" But the security man who was driving and who was an experienced man who knew his business said, "That's not a good idea. This is a bad part of town. Anything could happen here, and besides, he's probably just sleeping it off. If you want to pick up this one, sir, what about the one on the next corner, and the next? You'd need a semi to pick up all of them." So the General Authority sat quietly back while his driver moved into the center lane and got up speed to get him to conference on time where he told the assembled brethren he'd been impressed by the spirit and by an experience he'd had that very evening to set aside his prepared text and speak instead about the importance of the Word of Wisdom in the last days.

At about this time, a certain aging hippie drove the very way the General Authority and the high priest had just come. He was a kind of middle-aged adolescent with a pony tail and an earring, who played lead guitar in a local rock 'n' roll band and drove a rusting VW van covered with bumper stickers promoting abortion rights, gay liberation, legalization of marijuana, and the making of love not war. And when he saw the man in the gutter, he put down his joint and stopped the van. And when he could not revive the unconscious victim, he dragged and lifted him inside the van and drove several miles out of his way to an emergency treatment center in the suburbs where the pretty girl behind the desk asked if he and the injured man were related. "No," he said. And she frowned and asked what the patient's insurance carrier was. "Who knows?" he said. "I found him in the street. Maybe he doesn't have one." To which she replied while filing her fingernails that in that case, unfortunately, they couldn't take him in, not without insurance. She was sorry, but it was policy, and there were no exceptions. But the lead guitarist with the earring and pony tail lost his patience, and he yelled at the girl behind the desk, and at the physician on call, and at an administrator on the telephone until they became mute and embarrassed and agreed to do what they could if he would just quiet down and go away. So he left, leaving his van in the parking lot and his wrist watch and van keys on the desk as a kind of unsolicited guarantee, and he promised to come back Sunday night right after his gig was finished and pay what he could of the charges. He took off down the street walking and whistling and smoking a cigarette and balancing his electric guitar on his shoulder like a ghetto blaster. It was almost Sunday, and the Sunday School question which hovered in the air and always has, though it's not often asked very well nor answered very carefully, is just this: who in that story was neighbor to the man who strayed into a bad part of Cleveland?

Though we sometimes relate stories, I suspect we rarely make them heard. And if we have trouble telling memorable Bible tales, problems with those from the Book of Mormon are immense. Did you ever wonder why stories from the Book of Mormon are so much less familiar? Oh, I know that primary song: "Book of Mormon Stories That My Teacher Tells to Me." It's my children's favorite, the one they always ask for. But when I asked them, and the other Primary children, and their older brothers and sisters, and their parents and priesthood leaders to tell me Book of Mormon stories, they were not very forthcoming or very helpful. My middle daughter said she liked "the one about the good Samarite or whatever you call him." My oldest liked the one about the man who didn't have to kill his son after all. And we were all relieved to find that the third suggestion, the story about getting the brass plates, actually did come from the Book of Mormon. My wife tells the story about the brother of Jared, about those Tupperware boats he built, and how he got them illuminated. That's a good story, and I like to hear her tell it, but there don't seem to be many others to match it. At least not many that people recall. Maybe that's because, like me, nobody much reads much beyond 1 Nephi. Or maybe it's because after all those miles of exhortation and prophecy, prophecy and exhortation, we are so glazed over and hypnotized we don't recognize a story when we see one. There are, after all, some amazing stories in the Book of Mormon. Remember, for instance, the remarkable story of Ammon.

Ammon is one of four sons of King Mosiah, all troubled adolescents, who cause endless headaches in the community and endless heartaches for their father. But unlike the less fortunate juvenile delinquents of our own acquaintance, these kids are turned decisively from mischief by an intervening angel. They are, in fact, so shaken by this supernatural dressing down that henceforward the wayward brothers become models of gospel rectitude, forsaking sin and rebellion for missionary work among the dangerous and benighted Lamanites.

After a difficult journey through the wilderness, the brothers separate, each entering a different Lamanite kingdom. Ammon enters a land called Ishmael, which like the ancient Greek island of Taurus, has an interesting law, making it a crime to be a stranger. All strangers are arrested, bound, and taken before King Lamoni, who decides whether the perpetrator will be slain, imprisoned, or merely banished. In general, Lamoni is in all such matters a consistent and reliable advocate of capital punishment. But, astonishingly, in the case of Ammon, he makes an exception. When he asks the young man what he is doing in Ishmael, Ammon replies that he wants to live there, perhaps even for the rest of his life. This answer clearly astounds the

king. (It seems likely that even the people of Ishmael were not particularly anxious to live there.) In any case, the answer so impresses Lamoni that, instead of following his own habit and the national custom by having Ammon slain, he offers instead to give him one of his daughters in marriage. (I am not making this up.)

Ammon, however, is a missionary and therefore forbidden even the most harmless romantic dalliance. Serious matrimonial alliance with a nonmember is out of the question. The young man declines, stating diplomatically that he wishes instead only to be of service—which is to say, a servant—to the king. This request pleases Lamoni not a little. Immediately, he puts the young foreigner in charge of all his herds and flocks, a great honor, or, at least, it would be if it did not place Ammon right back in immediate danger of losing his life. The difficulty, you see, with shepherding Lamoni's flocks is that when the king's herdsmen drive his livestock to a watering hole, marauding bands of Lamanites regularly lie in wait to stampede and scatter the animals. And when the herdsmen then report the loss, the angered king's invariable response is to have them executed. Though less at fault, obviously, than the actual thieves, the herdsmen are far more available to satisfy the royal thirst for justice.

And sure enough, when Ammon and the other shepherds approach a watering hole with Lamoni's flocks, they are ambushed by Lamanite rustlers, who drive off all the animals, leaving the herdsmen in disarray and open despair. All except Ammon, that is. Where others see calamity, Ammon, an altogether visionary man, sees golden opportunity. He rejoices, rallies, and organizes the shepherds to round up the scattered animals and head them once again toward the watering hole. The bandit Lamanites are a little stunned at the shepherds' return. In fact, Ammon's fellow shepherds are themselves a little incredulous, seeing nothing to be gained by tempting fate a second time. But Ammon bids them hang back and keep the flock together while he advances alone on the foe and delivers a quick object lesson. He pulls out a sling and in rapid succession terminates no fewer than six armed Lamanites. The startled bandits rush him as a body, but Ammon draws the sword he just happens to have at his side, decapitates the leader of these villains, and then severs every arm raised against him in anger.² Over a dozen limbs come down. It's an impressive display. (And I'm still not making any of this up.)

² The fact that not one of the amputees, except, of course, the one who loses his head, actually dies of his wound seems to underscore a certain kind of divine charity attendant on this violence or at least to indicate an advanced state of Lamanite emergency medicine hitherto unrecognized by Book of Mormon commentators.

The shepherds nervously hanging back with Lamoni's reassembled flocks are certainly impressed. They too now fall to rejoicing and, fearing that no one will believe what they have witnessed, set about gathering up the severed arms to take back as evidence. They go straightway to the king to tell him what has transpired, and, as proof, lay the collected limbs out before him on the palace floor. And, indeed, the king is awed. It is perhaps safe to say that no one has ever brought him such a lavish gift of arms before. And when he asks to see the man who accomplished such a feat, everyone is astonished to discover that Ammon is not among them. Modestly and with a spirit of undistracted service, he has returned not to the court, but to the royal stables to carry on his duties as a servant.

Lamoni sends for Ammon, but his heart is troubled. Such deeds are not done by mere mortals, he thinks. Surely this Ammon must be the great spirit manifest somehow in human form. Feeling suddenly vulnerable, Lamoni is afraid to speak to Ammon when he arrives. Ammon, for his part, is much too polite ever to speak to his master before being spoken to. And so, scripture records, these two men stand carefully saying nothing at all and avoiding one another's eyes for over an hour before suddenly it occurs to Ammon exactly what the king is thinking and why he is afraid to speak in Ammon's presence.

Ammon breaks the silence to express these concerns, but his words only drive Lamoni even deeper into apprehension. Surely, thinks the king, if he can read my very thoughts, this must indeed be the great spirit. The servant, however, reassures his cowering master. "I am not," he insists, "the great spirit. But if I tell you how I do these things, will you believe whatever I say?"

It is at this point we learn that the entire chain of events in this story (Ammon's arrival, his refusal to marry, the civil service job, the predictable incident with the flocks, the stonings and dismemberments and decapitation, Ammon's modest withdrawal to the stables, and now this divining of thoughts) everything, everything has come together in a carefully worked out plot, a trap, a set-up. What can the terrified Lamoni answer now, but "yes"? Ammon has ensnared him, as the scripture says, "by guile" (Alma 18:23), and, in so doing, opened up the land of Ishmael for the full-time missionary program. "What do you know about God?" he asks next. "Would you like to know more?"

What follows must certainly be the most comprehensive Institute lecture ever given in the history of the planet. Beginning with "In the beginning," Ammon recounts the entire content and history of the Old Testament, then turns to the Book of Mormon from the beginning to the moment of his own speaking, and goes on from there to tell

and interpret the events of the New Testament, even though these have not yet taken place. It is an overpowering performance, and Lamoni is appropriately overwhelmed. He swoons and falls into a kind of coma. Unfortunately, what the court around him sees is that Lamoni has fallen to the ground, is lying motionless, and has stopped breathing. Those among them given to reliance on the reasoning of men conclude that he has died. They insist the queen must bury him. Others, of a more mystical bent, are convinced that somehow Ammon has done something supernatural to the king. He is not really dead. The queen should at least check carefully with Ammon before burying her husband. Perplexed, she does so. "Many," she tells him, "insist the king is dead, that he already stinks. They say I must bury him."

"What do you think?" Ammon asks in reply. When she allows that to her mind her husband does not stink, and when she is even willing to believe Ammon's promise that Lamoni will regain consciousness, he praises her extraordinary faithfulness. And indeed, on the very next day her faith is rewarded. As predicted, King Lamoni awakens from what turns out to have been a great vision in which all that Ammon had told him before his swoon, the whole gigantic lecture, has been confirmed and documented in living color. The tale he tells is so moving, so overwhelming that this time the entire court is overcome: the courtiers, the queen, Ammon himself, and King Lamoni all over again. The whole entourage falls into a swoon—everyone except a certain "Lamantish" woman named Abish, who, as it turns out, was converted to the gospel secretly two years before, and so, in effect, has already seen the movie. Consequently, she alone is left standing and feels called to make this great outpouring of the spirit known as a sign to all the Lamanite people in the surrounding country.

But when she goes out and brings in the people to witness the miracle, what they see is that the king and all his entourage have fallen to the ground, are lying motionless, and have stopped breathing. Despite all Abish can do to prevent it, the wicked conclusion begins to circulate that these people are, in fact, dead and should be buried before they begin to stink. Some even make preparations, while certain others, speculating that Ammon beguiled the king and certainly must have been responsible for this atrocity, actually attempt to mutilate the Nephite missionary's now defenseless body.

The whole transcending miracle which poor Abish wanted to proclaim to her people is teetering on the brink of disaster. But then, suddenly—by the intervening power of heaven, of course—first the

queen, then King Lamoni, and, subsequently, Ammon and all the transported court are returned to consciousness just in the nick of time to prevent great mischief and untimely interment. Elation and rejoicing, conversion and enlightenment sweep through the land. A people lost to the light of the gospel is restored again. Ammon continues, meanwhile, as an exceptional missionary and leader, converting Lamoni's father and opening all the Lamanite lands to missionary work. Eventually, he leads a large group of converted Lamanites back among the Nephites to the land of Jershon, where finally, loved and revered, he disappears gently and honorably from the record.

That is the very long and altogether remarkable story of Ammon. Why, when I ask for Book of Mormon stories, is it not recounted to me, either in part or in whole, as are the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the Sacrifice of Isaac, and so many other Bible stories? Certainly it's amazing enough. Sometimes, I suspect, it's a little too amazing, too heroic, too miraculous and incredible for credulity. But then there are Bible stories as well that strain credulity. Some of us simply assume that wonders and miracles occurred more commonly in distant and saintlier dispensations. Others hold the inverse but related belief that scriptural texts (ancient and modern) have never been strangers to hyperbole and even fabrication. Either view provides precedent and parallels, but in Ammon's case the parallels to biblical stories and heroes are particularly striking. Like Moses, Ammon rouses a lost covenant people and leads them away from slavery and through the wilderness to safety in a promised ancestral land. Like Joseph in Egypt, Ammon rises as a foreign slave to a position of power and prominence second only to the monarch. Like Samson, he single-handedly slays entire hordes of armed attackers. Like David, he defeats the king's powerful enemies with a simple shepherd's sling. David's victim was a giant, but Ammon kills more than one. In decapitations, the two heroes stand tied at one apiece. Ammon, however, clearly leads in the general category of mutilations.

There is a sense in which Ammon summarizes and surpasses all the biblical heroes, is all of them rolled into one . . . and is more. Possessed of the obvious heroic virtues enshrined in cartoon epics on Saturday morning television, Ammon is a super-hero. But unfortunately, the Book of Mormon account renders him only in flat cartoon dimensions.³ He has Moses' leadership ability but, unlike the biblical

³ The famous Arnold Friberg illustrations are no off-the-wall fantasy. The painter and the book's more recent video animators have tapped directly into the mild but mighty spirit of the narrative.

prophet, is never out of control, never beyond his depth, never at a loss for words. He shows Joseph's dedication to service, but never appears so naive or impolitic as the young Joseph, nor so subtle and political as the mature Joseph. He has Samson's strength and courage, but not his brashness, nor vanity, nor weakness for the wrong kind of women. And Ammon's rise and reign show none of the wavering fortunes, none of the tragedy and human fallibility of David's. David, a great king and Israel's mightiest, most celebrated hero, is also human and in some important ways a failure: for every heroism there is a cowardice; for every certainty, a doubt; for every victory, a defeat.

In contrast, Book of Mormon bad guys are uncompromising in their villainy, and its heroes are insuperable in their virtue. They are large in stature, mighty and strong, unswerving in their faith and in their purpose, yet mild and sweet as mother's milk. Like Ammon, nearly all these men are cast in a mold I call *Nephionic paragonitude*. Now, I have invented this term, first to pay homage to the long, defining shadow which Nephi casts over all subsequent heroes in the Book of Mormon, and second, to label that influence with a proper and properly unmistakable abstraction. Nephi is, as we all know, of such exceedingly good report that it would probably be better had the reports not been written by his own hand. He is such a pure embodiment of faithful, faith-promoting, masculine virtue that he teeters on the page away from living flesh and blood into moral abstraction. He and those who follow are two-dimensional, light or dark, Nephi or Laman. They are plain and simple binary paradigms of good and of evil, and one wonders how much carving and shaping it took to make that world and those lives appear so uncomplicated and so unlike our own.

Roland Barthes writes about two kinds of writing in the world (1982, 185-93). One, self-absorbed and literary, which for this very reason provokes us, tells us more about the world than we expected. It cannot speak in doctrines or provide evidence to make some case or other, because the governing value is the *how* of writing, the language itself. And the strength and integrity of language lie precisely in its freedom from subservience to content, in its openness to ambiguity. It embraces risk and anomaly not ideologically, but by telling stories faithful to the complicated and shifting fine structures of real experience. Think of the book of Job. Even while it affirms, it raises agonizing questions.

The other kind of writing functions precisely in the service of doctrine. It gives evidence, explains, and instructs. The language itself, the *how* of writing, far from being an end, is never more than an instructional means. Such writing may sometimes have a free, but always has an insistent character. It discriminates. It edits. It speaks in

dialects: Marxist or Methodist or Mormon, for instance. It is inelegantly prone to exhortation and prediction and, like people who are a little too insistent, is met by readers with a little more wariness, a little more reservation. The Book of Mormon is clearly this kind of writing. Even stories have the insistent character of exhortation. The lives are not as we have experienced life, but as they ought or ought not to be lived according to doctrine. And though we have been schooled to dismiss our reservations and to value these stories for their doctrinal content, some of us resist passively by not rereading and not remembering them.

I may only be pointing up what, theoretically, everyone knows: namely, that the Book of Mormon is mostly an abridgement, a reduction to the plain and precious, from which many things are missing. And I am asserting wistfully that those missing things may also be extraordinarily precious though probably not plain at all.

There is presently a fashionable school of textual criticism which argues that it is not what a book says or openly asserts that constitutes its real subject, its deepest meaning, but rather what it fails to say or even directly suppresses. The arguments tend to be lengthy and arcane, but the phenomenon they describe is not unlike certain familiar kinds of conversation: "Of course I like your dress. I mean, you have some dresses I probably like better, but this one's fine. Come on, if I didn't like your dress, I'd say so." There are, to be sure, examples that cut deeper into blood and bone: "Of course I like your family . . ." or "Of course I don't think you're a failure . . ." or "Of course I'm not interested in him. Why would I be interested in anyone else?" Why indeed? The question rings on in every ear, including, you can be sure, the speaker's own. Good writers of dialogue know that almost all meaningful discourse between people who matter to one another is as much avoidance as approach.

The only absolutely unedited story I think I ever heard was told me in a Greyhound bus on the New Jersey Turnpike and told only—or perhaps I should say precisely—because I was, to the teller, a complete stranger and openly reluctant to listen. It was an unattractive account told by a young woman who, when we reached the New York Port Authority, was going to have to decide between two connecting buses, one which would take her to her brother's home in upstate New York, or another which would take her downtown to her pimp. And it was her own observation that she could tell neither of these men anything remotely approaching the whole, unedited truth.

Texts (including scriptural ones) are not unlike the human beings who write them. They gauge the context and the audience. They travel mostly within the safety of convention and say what is sayable over

and on top of what is meant, or what is recognized, even fixed upon, but carefully, reflexively not said or meant. When I was very young, I sometimes prayed aloud to diffuse with the sound of my own voice a notion which had come into my head, from who knows where, and which seemed to me a great sin: the notion that there might not be a God at all. Since then I have sometimes wondered what was measured by the urgency in those appeals: was it faith or fear? If fear, which seems more likely, then fear of what? of punishment? or of being right? of death perhaps? I do not know, but the true subject of those prayers was not their content.

If you'll forgive me that theoretical digression and indulge my now applying this theory to the Book of Mormon, we can, while being very fashionable, look for its underlying subject and deepest meaning in whatever is most clearly absent from and most resolutely suppressed in the text. I think the answer is quite clear. It must be sex.

The Book of Mormon is surely about sin and virtue, but with regard to sins of the flesh there is precious little, and of fleshly virtues there is nothing whatsoever. In this regard, and as scriptures go, it may just be the purest, most thoroughly purged and expurgated, fumigated, laundered, sanitized, and correlated ancient scripture ever brought to plate or paper. Next to the Book of Mormon, the Bible, both New Testament and Old, seems positively pornographic.

While I was in the mission field (during the last dispensation), a friend in another mission wrote me the following observation: "Right now," he said, "I've glanced long enough at my companion to tell that he is reading the Song of Solomon, the one book in the Bible Joseph Smith said was not inspired writing. Read it and see why." (I've read it, by the way, and beg to differ with Joseph Smith.) "This," my friend continued, "is a good indication of the preoccupations that my companion has. As a matter of fact, I think you two would hit it off. You are very much alike."

Now I didn't need to quote the last two sentences in order to make my point but have done so in the continuing spirit of confession. Two years before I received that letter, my high school seminary teacher drew wanton snickers when, in a hierarchy of motivational incentives commonly employed by advertisers, he listed "sex." We did not laugh, as we would have in junior high, because a teacher and cleric had used the forbidden three-letter word. We were by then terribly and self-consciously sophisticated. And we certainly did not laugh at the notion that sex sells. No, we laughed because in his hierarchy of motivators he listed sex as number seventeen.

Some things are laughable, especially to adolescent boys who have discovered something of the world's powerful preoccupations, and who,

because they are also new to these, and to the politics of presentation, are likely to laugh at the mincing arbiters of propriety.

You will, however, find no such temptations and few if any such boys in the Book of Mormon. There are, to be sure, Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah, who made so much trouble for the Church and for their fathers. There is also Corianton who went off into Sidon after the harlot Isabel. But these are not the awkward, ambivalent, pressingly human adolescent boys of our acquaintance. They are, instead, archetypal sinners, the rebellious heretic and the fornicator, whose sins are recounted in a past and distant perfect tense as prelude to the flood of exhortation which will convert them and turn them from evil to equally archetypal lives of *Nephionic paragonitude*.

There are here no tales of love nor of seduction. No long-smitten Jacob at the well. No Samson and Delilah. No desperate eunuch's wife with Joseph. No terrible passions like Amnon's for his sister nor David's for Bathsheba. No song for Solomon. No Mary Magdalene for Christ to kiss upon the mouth. No grudging celibate concession that it's better at least to marry than to burn. There is mention of whoring, yes, and of rape. But whoring's just a business, and rape is yet another tedious, sordid, brutal, and impersonal face of war. (In the Book of Mormon even war is boring.⁴) Of human sexuality, however, there is not a trace. There is barely any trace of gender. It's no secret that without imports from the Bible there wouldn't be enough named women in the Book of Mormon to employ the fingers of a single hand: Sariah, Lehi's wife; Abish, the Lamanitish woman; and, interestingly, Isabel the harlot. That's it. Only the addition of the biblical Sarah and Mary to this scriptural record covering some 522 pages and more than 800 years brings the compliment to five.

This is a book of men, by men, for men, and openly and conventionally, at least, about men only. It's a closed priesthood shop, whereby one is reminded that in our culture "priesthood" is principally a gender designation. If I were to categorize this book by gender, the temptation would be to call it homo-asexual literature. And if the theory guiding this rumination is right, it is only through cracks and fissures in this plaster eunuch that we can find our way to blood and bone and tissue. But where are these cracks and fissures?

Let's begin with the obvious—with Sariah, who is at very least an open blemish. Her name is mentioned only five times (the women's record) in the Book of Mormon. Still, we learn enough to conclude

⁴ If you want to know why, see the excellent eleventh chapter in Hugh Nibley's *Since Cumorah* (1967).

with one classic priesthood commentator “that she did not possess very great faith in the mission of her husband, or in the fulfillment of his prophecies; she rather regarded him as a visionary man, who was leading her and her children into trouble and danger by his dreams and revelations, and consequently [she] was prone to murmur when any difficulty arose” (Reynolds 1910, 311).

A peevish, niggling Sariah? A woman of little faith? I doubt it. Let’s try the story differently. This time let’s imagine Sariah in Cleveland where one day her husband complains aloud and for the umpteenth time that the city is a cesspool. All around them liquor and drugs, gambling, prostitution, and perversion. Every newspaper carries accounts of robbery and murder, of rape and fraud and infidelity. Charlatans run the government. And the people seem indifferent. The wealthy grow fatter and fatter, while the homeless go hungry, and ordinary working people slip into poverty. The place is going to hell in a hurry.

What can she say? She’s seen the magazines on the racks at the grocery store, the movie marquees, the kids hanging around on corners when they ought to be in school. Her best friend is divorcing. Her neighbor’s daughter is pregnant but unmarried. Her neighbor says the boy who did it uses marijuana if not worse. The evening news shows long gray lines of people at the unemployment office. It also shows the city fathers celebrating a bond sale with black ties and limousines and smiles and cheese and wine. Not a week before, a seventy-two-year-old woman froze to death in a doorway barely half a mile from her home. Sariah has eyes and ears. So what can she say? Her husband is right.

But when he tells her he’s had a vision in which the Lord has commanded them to leave their comfortable four-bedroom ranch with family room and patio, leave their possessions, their troubled neighbors, and divorcing friends to move out into the mountains, she is uncertain. Embattled or not, a home is a home, a roof over your head, an investment of labor and memory. And divorcing or not, friends are friends. Troubled neighbors need neighbors too. And what about the children? It’s true, she has one son, the youngest, who is excited about this. He’s kind of a big kid, and strong, stronger than the other boys. He’s enthusiastic and still young enough to think that going off into the mountains of West Virginia to camp with his dad is the greatest idea he ever heard in his life. But he’s kind of self-righteous, and he’s always preaching at the other kids, or tattling on them. They hate that.

Her older boys, meanwhile, are full-blown adolescents, and they’re working through a heavy case of adolescent separation. They don’t even want to go to breakfast with their family. And the oldest, Laman, well it’s his senior year, for heaven’s sake. He’s finally on the varsity,

and he has a lot of friends. There are some scars a boy just never gets over. What happens when they want to date, when it's time to marry? This is not going to be any *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. Lehi is negotiating with the only family in the city weird enough to go along with an insanity of this magnitude. "The geeks of the universe!" She can already hear her sons' enraged complaining. And what about the girls? (Though nowhere named and barely mentioned, Sariah does have daughters.) How will they get along? These are city kids. They've never even been to Outward Bound. And what is the family going to live on, anyway? Nobody seems to be thinking about that. She's responsible for those kids. For keeping them going and fed and safe and moral and happy. Yes, her husband has had a vision, and her husband is a good man. But let's be honest. The whole thing sounds flat out crazy to Sariah.

And yet, Sariah is obedient. I have known latter-day Sariahs, women who wince but pack up their children, their aspirations, and even their better judgement and go along anyway. Sariah goes, and when her husband gets her and the children settled in tents in the West Virginia mountains, he says, "Hey, we've got to have our genealogical records. Uncle What'sis Name, the old reprobate, he's got them. I'm sending the boys. We're not going any further until they bring back those records." And so the boys drive back to Cleveland, and, you know, Uncle What'sis Name is an old reprobate, a mean drunk and miserly, and he's not about to give them anything. Instead he humiliates them and sends them packing. So when in the evening they find him falling-down drunk in the street, they kill him and mutilate the body. Then they steal the records they've come for, kidnapping a man who discovers them in the act, and they beat it back to the campsite in West Virginia.

So now they have their genealogy, but they also have the law after them, looking for some demented pack of vicious cult murderers, and even if they wanted to go back home again, they can't. They don't dare. Suddenly, incredibly, Sariah's sons, the boys she's raised to be better than the sordid world around them, are felons and fugitives and murderers. Just how is she to deal with that, to square it with the purpose for which her husband says he's brought them all out here into the wilderness? Oh, there are reasons. Men always have their reasons, their principled explanations. She's had this all carefully explained to her. But she has her own mind too, and her intuitions. We are talking here about a mother.

Was Sariah a grumbler? Oh, I hope so. While Lehi saw his visions, his wife Sariah saw hardship and heartache, mouths to feed, and bitter fighting among her children. She had spirits to raise, egos to soothe,

and the burden of arbitration without the right of opinion. And yet she went. George Reynolds comments, "Of Sariah's birth and death we have no record, nor do we know to what tribe of Israel she belonged. [After all, he might have added, she was only a woman.] She lived to reach the promised land, and, being then aged and worn out by the difficulties and privations of the journey through the Arabian wilderness, very probably passed into her grave before her husband" (1910, 311). We remember Lehi for his transcendent visions, but I think I should rather have had the earthbound story of Sariah.

I also love the story of Ammon, God's larger-than-life warrior who cannot fail, but I love better the mostly missing story of Abish the Lamanitish woman whose faith and works and very best intentions nearly bring disaster on them both. Ammon is a superstar, a plain and perfect hero, but Abish is more nearly, I think, a teacher about life.

And what of Isabel, the last named woman in that America? And called a harlot. I wonder. Was she a whore as Tamar was to Judah? Or like Delilah, a captive to her own beauty and to her embittered people? Did her brother or father ravish her and throw her out? Was she a sacred temple whore in service to some priesthood? Or just a businesswoman with a balance sheet and a managing director to set her hours and take her profits? I wonder about Isabel the harlot, as storytellers have always wondered about harlots, and sought without success to mark the fountainhead of obvious evil.

And then, what about unnamed women? The daughter of Jared, for instance, who unlike the brother of that other Jared has no long and shielded but finally discoverable name. She is only "the daughter of Jared," though cast in the pale image of Herod's Salome. A girl who dances to please a man to please her father. A pretty pawn. How old is she? Seventeen perhaps? or fifteen? or fourteen? Old enough to have been married by her murderous father to her father's murderer. Do children ever love too blindly or too much? Are women ever caught between their fathers and their lovers? Is the world arrayed in black and rosy white? Does every lunge at justice end in horror? Well, Shakespeare might attempt an answer. So might the writers of Genesis or Judges or Matthew. But the yield is pretty meager from the Book of Mormon.

I have a friend who is convinced that the missing first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon contain revelations on roadshows, and building funds, and potluck suppers, and recipes for Jello salads. I hope he's right. And I hope there's more: daddy daughter dates, and internecine warfare in the Sunday School, and gossip from the left and from the right. And children who don't quite repent to make us testimony proud, but don't quite go to hell in a hand basket, either. And church basket-

ball mayhem with recruiting scandals and crooked officials. And family soap operas with squabbles and love affairs and prime time marital sex. And women, lots of women with names and voices and opinions as well as smiles and duties and behinds, and sometimes with guilt and depression, and sometimes not. I want the whole recalcitrant, embarrassing variety of life that so weighs down our plain and precious precepts of the gospel. I want the truth. And story truths—as the writer Tim O'Brien once very nearly said—are mostly truer than the truths of exhortation.

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