Scripture, History, and Faith: A Round Table Discussion

Participants:

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Thomas: **We live in a society that is increasingly secular and fragmented. Popular culture looks to Hollywood for its great myths. Given that this is our circumstance, how relevant are the concepts of canon and scripture in our time?**

Compton: Certainly canon and scripture are relevant to our secular and fragmented society. It is especially a secular, fragmented society that needs scripture. Hollywood, despite an occasional good movie, often does not provide us with the most morally perceptive, spiritually visionary myths.

Edwards: Scripture is both relevant and irrelevant. That which makes it scripture, its relevance for all time, makes me believe that scriptures available to the Mormon community are just as valid now as they would be in any other day and age.

Epperson: First of all, I'd question the assertion that our society is increasingly secular. I think that if you look at the statistics on belief, church and synagogue attendance, church contributions, and so forth, they tend to indicate that this is not a secular society. Quite the contrary. Also I would want to draw attention to the phenomena of fundamentalisms—Christian,

Islamic, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish, etc., plus the growth of New Age religions. All of this indicates that ours is a very religious, very spiritual culture, but we haven't quite figured out what that means.

I think our society is more polarized than it is fragmented. I think we're very polarized between "haves" and "have nots," between multi-media-computer-literate people on the one hand, and those who are not on the other. We're polarized between fundamentalists and people who are more ecumenically minded.

As far as Hollywood is concerned, I think that Hollywood also draws a lot of its narratives from a small source of texts and myths. These include a state of primeval innocence, a fall from grace, the expulsion from the garden, and then the quest: you have the religious quest, the vision quest, pilgrimages, the journey home through contested territory. I think that Hollywood draws upon common sources that many of us plug into. That's one of the reasons why some Hollywood movies resonate with us.

Anthropologists point out that canon-making is a universal human activity, so the answer would be "Yes" to the question of whether canon, myth, and scripture are relevant concepts. They are relevant because we're surrounded by them. We're living in these canons and their myths. We're living out these scriptures today. For me, one of the big questions is the media by which those canons are being presented. I'm afraid that myth, canon, and a lot of what makes them complex (the ambiguity, the texture, the length, the orality, and the aurality of myth and canon) are being sacrificed on the altar of the two-dimensional media in movies and television. And my fear is that we think that if you can't lick 'em, join 'em. So we make *Legacy*. And we put the scriptures on film. We put the scriptures and conference on video. And that's going to end up being a substitute for encountering our myths, our canon, our scripture. That's what really concerns me, frankly, because the extended, imaginative, and rational engagement with the text flattens out.

Thomas: **Steve, let me ask you to elucidate one point that you jumped over quickly. Essentially you were saying that you don't have to worry about religion, because we are essentially religious, and therefore religion will take care of itself. Therefore scriptures will always exist. Even though people may not pay attention to them, scriptures in some form will al-**

ways be lurking out there somewhere. Is that the point?

Epperson: I tend to think that most people are innately religious. That is part of the historical record of humankind. But I would also argue that not all religions are conducive to the well-being of the human family. We come from a religious tradition (Christian and Jewish) that repudiates idolatrous religion. And so I think that even as all religions are not equal, so not all texts are equal.

Toscano: I think our society is both polarized and fragmented, which is not bad but inevitable in a free and diverse society. While secularism may be dominant, I agree with Steve that religion and scripture are neither waning nor irrelevant. As long as people try to make meaning out of their lives, there will be religion; and as long as people write about their religious, meaning-making experiences, there will be scripture. As Americans with a secular government which tries to separate church and state, we are inheritors of the rationalist/Enlightenment world view which popularized the notion that we were going to educate everybody and get rid of our religious superstitions. It hasn't worked. Here we are in the post-modern age, and religion was supposed to be passé by now. But it's not. I recently read a survey in a popular, nationally distributed magazine. They were asking people if they prayed, and if they believed in God and angels. I was absolutely astonished by the figures. The positive responses were in the 80-90 percent range. People believe in God. People are meditating or praying. People believe in angels. If a book like *Embraced by the Light* can become a national best-seller, you know that religious interest is not waning. New books on religion and scriptures are coming out all the time, and they sell well. Religion is still big business.

The real problem, as I see it, is not the survival of scripture and religion, but the absence of forums for intelligent, public, religious discourse, both in and out of our churches and universities. Because discussions about religion have been forbidden in public schools and have been considered taboo in the public arena, we have not developed acceptable formats for discussing religious beliefs while still promoting tolerance. Where is the forum and what is the vocabulary with which a spiritual and intelligent person can talk seriously about religion? Fantasy, science fiction, and novels and films written in the style of magical realism may be some of the few avenues left where a person can discuss religion freely and creatively. Even here the discussion is usually in a disguised form. Are

these the devotional genres of our age? A related problem is how to create a language that fosters discourse between polarized groups. For example, the terms "scripture" and "canon" are understandable in the context of traditional, Western religions, but do they work for other groups? It may depend on how broadly we define the terms. For instance, even in such an open-ended and loosely-defined group as the New Age religion, there may be a canon, if canon is defined as the films, books, and texts that express the unspoken consensus and describe the combined religious experience of the group. Such works are given an unofficial status. By understanding the tendency of religious groups to create even unofficial canons, people from polarized groups may find some common ground for discourse.

Thomas: **How do you define scripture?**

Compton: I define scripture as anything with great spiritual power, with a high concentration of spirituality. For instance, I include the short stories of Flannery O'Connor, a good general conference or Sunstone talk, Navaho myths, the *Odyssey,* the diaries of Patty Sessions, the essays of Lowell Bennion, the songs of Richard Thompson, Bergman's movie *Fanny and Alexander,* and the Tao Te Ching.

I do not see a strict scriptural/nonscriptural polarity, but rather a continuum, with gradations leading from high spirituality to low spirituality. No book has pure spirituality; every book has the limitations and imperfections of its individual writer(s) and the cultural limitations of the milieu from which it emerged. An important part of scriptural study is isolating those imperfections, so that they do not become imbedded in a religious community as absolute truth. For instance, there are misogynist elements in the Bible. If, like fundamentalist Protestants, we accept the Bible as entirely inerrant, we are stuck with defending and continuing misogyny, which is morally wrong and offensive to God. On the other hand, we should not throw away the Bible as scripture simply because some parts of it are misogynist. Other parts of the Bible contain important texts for the history of women, and establish equality and justice for women. A scripture can become canonized (formally accepted and referred to as scripture) for a certain group of people after it has proved its spiritual power to them for a certain length of time. But a text is scripture before it is canonized, because it contains spiritual power.

Wright: I would define scripture as any religiously oriented discourse

(written or oral) which is perceived as authoritative and/or foundational in some way. This definition includes more than the canon (for example, the Talmud, in addition to the Hebrew Bible).

An "in-house" definition of scripture would add that scripture is *inspired* discourse. This seems to be a secondary attribute, not necessarily that which makes it scripture. Inspiration can't be empirically demonstrated in a work. It is a judgment which a person accepting a work as scripture gives to it. The empirical test of inspiration often ends up being the correspondence the discourse has with preexisting belief.

Since scripture is authoritative religious discourse, the question arises regarding whence its authority comes. As with inspiration, authority is something attributed to a text. It is not necessarily inherent. It is true that a scriptural discourse may have a rhetoric of authority, but that only becomes incumbent upon someone when that person allows the discourse to be authoritative. Hence, in my definition I speak of perceived authority, not inherent authority.

That authority is attributed rather than intrinsic is in part demonstrated in the harmonistic and selective use that communities make of scripture. Scripture tends to contain diverse voices, having accumulated over time from different writers (even the writings of one individual over a lifetime may contain diverse views). A community of whatever character (conservative, liberal, fundamentalist, critical) cannot give equal weight to all that is written. Therefore, what might be judged as the plain meaning of a passage (its logical or contextual meaning) is disregarded and given what the community thinks to be a more suitable interpretation, or the section of scripture is effectively ignored or down-played as less relevant by the community. Thus readers dictate to the text, rather than the text dictating to the readers. The readers' will dominates. Authority is conferred.

Edwards: I define scripture as that body of knowledge which serves as an epistemological, metaphysical, and sociological tool in support of, and in defense of, one's testimony. That is, I believe that scripture is the revelation of God. As we accept and apply the word of God, we are enlightened and encouraged.

Toscano: Of course, the term "scripture" itself comes from the Latin root for "writing." Because certain religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are "People of the Book," scripture has come to mean the canonized writings of these groups and

their offshoots. Such a definition seems to imply that other religions don't have scripture and that scripture can only be defined by group consensus or official religious leaders. Like Todd, I like the section from the Doctrine and Covenants which states that whoever speaks when moved upon by the Holy Ghost speaks scripture (D&C 68:4). I like this definition both because it is expansive and open and also because it acknowledges the personal and subjective nature of determining scripture. This doesn't mean that I object to the use of the term "scripture" as authoritative text. Words often have more than one connotation. "Scripture" can belong to an individual or a group. We sometimes distinguish "canon" from "scripture" to show these two meanings—canon being scripture officially accepted by a group. I don't see us in the LDS church making much of a distinction between the two terms; both are used to refer to the four standard works, though the term "scripture" is also used sometimes to include talks and writings by general authorities. Unfortunately, the broad implication of the D&C passage is often overlooked.

Epperson: When I think of scripture, I think of four canonical books, and that they are a particular kind of book quite different from "the classics." What makes a book scripture is that we interact with it as an authoritative command. We feel addressed and commanded to do something: to repent, to experience a new life, and so forth.

To say that we believe in four books of scripture is also to say something very important, that is, that the canon expands. It wasn't set once and for all. And in that sense we partake of a traditional Jewish view that there is a written and an oral Torah. The whole Torah was given to Moses at Sinai, but the elucidation of that Torah goes on even today. Certain scriptures become more "canonical," more commanding, more relevant to individuals at one particular time in human history than at another. I think it has a lot to do with the way that human beings and human societies change. Otherwise, there would have been no oral Torah. There would just be written Torah, and it would be fixed, complete, with no additions.

Thomas: **What strikes me with each of these definitions of scripture is how different they are. David and Steve seem to see scripture in an objective, sociological way—scripture as authoritative text. Todd and Margaret seem to see scripture (as opposed to canon) in a subjective, phenomenological manner—scripture as manifestation of spiritual power. And Paul**

understands scripture in abstract, theological terms—as a "body of knowledge" which constitutes the word of God. But the profoundly moral understanding of religion (which is so fundamental to Mormon or Restoration theology) seems to be evident in most of your responses.

Epperson: Scripture places a particular kind of claim upon us. And it comes with an extraordinary sort of covenantal force and authority. I think that one of the reasons that we hear it that way is that we assume that there is a divine source to that voice, that divine voice is embodied in certain texts, and that those texts address us, confront us, with very powerful demands. Again, I think that some texts address us with greater authority and force than others. We encounter some more passionately and transactionally than others.

I think that a written canon plays a particularly important role in laying ground rules and guidelines; it is a sort of measure. And what's incumbent upon us is to find that portion of the canon which is particularly authoritative—those scriptures, that embodied authoritative voice, which stands over and against our words and our deeds. I feel that many of them will be weighed and found wanting. Some may be blessed.

Toscano: One of the important reasons for having a written and an oral Torah, from my perspective, is that it's a way of dealing with the tension between tradition and change. I agree that it's important to have the written canon as the standard against which you measure ideas and behavior. This standard is important because there's always the temptation to go along with whatever opinion fits with the current moral climate (for example, misogyny or feminism). But if you have a revealed tradition that sets out a standard of behavior, then I think it makes you ask some hard questions about your value system and the need for change. Does our tradition represent the eternal will of God, or do we need to change, either because we have misunderstood what was right in the past or because times and applications have changed? There can be problems either way. On the one hand, you can interpret the written Torah so strictly that you have a hard time adapting it to present circumstances, as is the case with most conservative groups. On the other hand, if the oral Torah is given precedence (relying on the living prophets in current LDS parlance), then scripture becomes irrelevant. It just slides out of consciousness, even if people are still giving lip service to it. While this may not seem so bad to some of us liberals who often equate

change with progress, we should remember that the church can also adopt current practices that we may find objectionable. I, for one, value the scriptural words of Jesus as a continual warning against our obsession with wealth and power in the church.

Jews consciously maintain an on-going interchange between the written and oral Torah; the written Torah cannot be changed, but it can be constantly examined and reinterpreted. However, in Mormonism (at least in Utah) we maintain a discourse that agrees to avoid dealing with any contradictions between the two. I see this as a real danger because it removes an important mechanism for self-examination, ethical decision-making, and added revelation. We talk about fixed, eternal principles. We talk about continuing revelation. We don't talk about the possibility that there may be contradictions between them, and that we've got to work through these problems if we want both to reach a moral position and to continue to assert the importance of scripture. As a result, we don't really deal with our texts (the revelation on priesthood and the blacks is an example). When new revelation comes, we simply go on without doing any exegesis of pertinent texts. No one really studies the scriptures and asks whether they were wrong in the past or might be in the present. This means that we never repent and acknowledge our sins as a group. We just ignore them along with the complexity and intricacy of our texts.

Thomas: **So fear is sometimes the guiding principle? Do we ignore our scriptures because we are afraid of contradiction, so we just sweep them under the rug, like a dusty voice?**

Toscano: I think that that's a large part of it. People are afraid of the implications of error, past or present. If our texts have errors, our current leaders might be wrong too. That's frightening both because it threatens the current church structure and also because it demands a lot of personal responsibility. But I think that it's more complex than simple fear. There are other reasons too. For example, a simple practical reason that we ignore scriptures is that they are difficult to read and understand. We also ignore them because we have a lay priesthood which is not trained in any tradition of exegesis. We have conference talks. But those are more often comprised of instructional stories and moral parables rather than the discussion of scriptural texts. At the same time, we have a strong authoritarian tradition which suggests that official leaders are the ones who

should give us the correct interpretation of scripture. But they don't. This leaves a void which everyone wishes were filled but is afraid to do so. This is true, for the most part, even of the BYU religion faculty. There is a very tight control on what is accepted discourse in the church, and neither scholarly scriptural exegesis nor private interpretations on the part of members is encouraged. Fear is a part of the reason that we ignore scriptures, but it's more complex than fear.

Thomas: **Given the fact that scripture is generally from a foreign historical setting, why should it, and how can it, be relevant to the current reader?**

Edwards: While I understand the influence of context on any historical awareness, I see no reason why historical setting has any undue influence on the message of scripture. As a cultural relativist—closet existentialist—it makes little difference to me where the action used to illustrate the method is conducted.

Wright: This question presupposes that a person critically realizes that the ideas and practices portrayed in earlier or ancient texts are foreign to the reader. Most untrained and traditional readers do not share this perception; it is something requiring education. At any rate, it seems to me that the true adventure and enjoyment of scripture only come after this gap is perceived. It forces the reader to explore the context in which the scriptural text was produced. The discovery that comes this way satisfies the soul and intellect. As a foreign text thus becomes clear, the modern reader can discover analogies to modern situations and thus find relevance.

Compton: Foreign scripture can be made relevant to an English-speaking reader through translation and through cultural interpretation. We should also develop our living scripture based on the tradition of archaic, foreign scripture. Interpretation of traditional, ancient scripture is a vital component of new scripture; Jesus can be seen as an interpreter of the Old Testament. This intertextuality both creates a new scriptural tradition and brings the old scripture to life.

Epperson: First, I think that we need to acknowledge that there have been many communities which have been physically, chronologically, and culturally distant from the setting and making of scripture, and yet they have not experienced the scriptures as essentially foreign at all. I would point your attention to African-American slaves, to liberation theologians, to fundamentalist Christians, to adult Jewish education courses, to post-Vatican II Catholics. I think particularly of African-American

slaves for whom biblical narratives were immediately and urgently real. I think what's happened now is that in our headlong rush into modernity, and in our assimilation of a consumptive and aggressively competitive lifestyle, many have been persuaded that something abiding and meaning-bestowing has been prematurely and foolishly discarded. And so many people are returning to the scriptural texts and attempting to make them less foreign. That they are so foreign to some is an indication of our own lack of fidelity to them. My question is who sued for divorce, and upon what grounds and were those grounds mature? Were they patient and long-suffering? I think scriptures become foreign if they are not read, or taught, if they are not measured critically up against contemporary demands, needs, and assertions. And if those things don't happen, they will remain or become increasingly irrelevant, arid, and estranged from us. If they are read, do they in fact address us authoritatively, with commands to healing deeds, just behaviors, and conversion to a new life?

But there is a second related issue. Some scriptures address the reader more urgently than others. Why do some scriptures seem strange, alien, maybe even repugnant? Why are others compelling, urgent, vividly alive? To answer these questions is an urgent task.

Toscano: I think the only way that the scriptures will not be foreign is if they're constantly being retranslated and reinterpreted. I see this as the religious and scholarly task that we face. Let me make a quick comparison. Everyone knows how difficult it is to read Shakespeare. How do you make people like his writings? It rarely happens without a good teacher or a good production to bring the plays to life. Kenneth Branagh has done this in his film versions of *Henry V* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. So has Zeffirelli with his recent *Hamlet*, or with his older *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Taming of the Shrew*. My daughters have learned to love Shakespeare through these films because the plays are interpreted and translated into a medium they can understand. I think this is what we have to do with the scriptures. (I'm not suggesting film as the preferred medium. I simply think we need better teachers, translations, and interpretations.) I'm always astonished that people read the scriptures fifteen minutes a day and still don't know a thing about what is in them. It's as though they're reading a foreign language without any comprehension.

I think we're at a point in time where the LDS church's use

of the King James Bible can be compared to the Catholic church's use of the Latin Bible at the end of the Middle Ages. Only an educated few easily understand the biblical language. Right now in the church the King James Version is a big stumbling block for most people. I love it. It has beautiful and poetic language. But I think it's a real mistake to be restricted to that one version, because its language is too foreign. It needs to be translated for our people now. We don't make non-English speakers read the Book of Mormon in English. Why should we make English speakers read the Bible in a foreign, obsolete language? That brings up the question of the Book of Mormon. Is it becoming too obsolete for English speakers to understand? Perhaps. Of course, Lynn Matthews Anderson has produced a version with updated language and has been chastised by leaders for her trouble.

Epperson: Foreign language translations of the Book of Mormon have tried to avoid the archaisms that we find in the English version.

Toscano: I feel the same way about obsolete prayer language. I don't like it because it creates an unnecessary barrier between the worshipper and God. Prayer and scripture are both meant to bring spiritual life. To keep canon and scripture vital, you've got to keep translating, keep reinterpreting, keep talking, keep making it fresh. It's amazing how compelling some of the biblical stories can be, how compelling they *are*, when they are read and told in the present idiom. They have not lost their force; they have only been obscured.

Thomas: **Your point seems to be that scholarship bridges the gap of meaning. David's point is that scholarship creates a gap of meaning. It appears that we have two perspectives here. One is that scholarship damages dialogue with the text. The other point is that scholarship creates a meaningful dialogue with the text.**

Toscano: I didn't understand David to mean that scholarship creates a gap which damages dialogue with the text. I understood him to be talking about a gap, or difference in perspectives between various cultures, which scholarship makes evident. I see the gap as a creative starting point, which scholarship may or may not bridge. Or maybe it will even damage our relationship with the text. Either way, scholarship forces us to encounter the text in various ways, which I see as positive, though I don't want to be limited to one approach. I appreciate the historical/critical method. But it is not the only way to interpret.

There are many ways of interpreting, translating, and making scripture relevant. Why limit ourselves to one kind of interpretation?

Epperson: There is an essential role that men and women perform when they take the findings of scholarship to reanimate them. For example, source criticism dismembers texts into pericope (small literary units). And what happens is that sometimes all that is left is contextless, segmented fragments of the text. I think that fifteen minutes of reading a day can dismember a text. We need people (I don't know what you call them)—popularizers, rabbis, preachers—who can try to say what we can learn from all of this scholarship. There is a way to put the story back together, but modified, corrected, illuminated by the work of scholars.

Compton: The ideal is to have the scholar-preacher. The scholar without spiritual guidance can be dangerous.

Thomas: **There is a tendency, especially in a church with lay leaders, to split ourselves. One group is at a university and their sole concern is with publishing, without relating their scholarship to the life of a church. And there is the church seemingly ignoring serious scholarship. That brings us to a current cultural concern. On their face, our scriptures seem to be patriarchal. If that is true, how can women approach scripture?**

Wright: My recommendations are for men and women. It is preeminently important for women and men to realize the extent to which women are excluded in scriptural writings. Women are not well represented in the Bible; they are represented even less in the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants. (See, for example, Lynn Matthews Anderson, "Toward a Feminist Interpretation of Latter-day Scripture," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 [Summer 1994]: 185-203.) This problem should be recognized.

I would recommend further that the reasons for this deficiency be examined. This requires developing critical abilities which allow readers to see that the visibility of one or the other gender is dependent upon culturally relative values.

I would suggest too that readers become aware of how approaches to and interpretations of scripture are tied to and reflective of gender interests. Certain methods may help women penetrate the masculinity of texts and their accepted interpretations. (Examples can be found in women's approaches to the Bible; see for example, *The Woman's Bible Commentary,* ed.

Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe [1992]).

Toscano: Actually, I want to turn the question around. Can men approach women with equality if women are subordinate in scripture? Why put all the burden on women? Women have approached, appropriated, and adapted scriptures to themselves for hundreds of years. Yes, it's been a problem for women to find their place, and damage has been done. But I think that women have been trained to identify with males, to read from a male point of view and still see the relevance of scripture for their own spirituality. I have this book, *Out of the Garden,* in which women use feminist readings of the Bible to find meaning for themselves in the texts. The more important question that I want to ask is this: Can men accept women as spiritual equals when scripture presents the patriarchal order as divine? Can men identify with women when women are too often absent or represented only from a male perspective? Can men see women as important subjects of religious discourse if women have no authoritative voice to create scripture or define canon? How can men learn to listen to women in this context? And how can women value their own voices and spirituality?

Epperson: I don't think the scriptures are inherently patriarchal, but our interpretations are. Our interpretations are often determined by institutions whose hermeneutics are patriarchal. It's an interpretation based on the suppositions of power. How are men going to see women in the scriptures? You start at the beginning, at Creation. Here man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God. They are created side by side as equals. God's intention is to give immortality and eternal life to all. A distinction between sexes is not made in the divine intentionality for the human family. Similarly, the covenant of Israel was with a community, not a group of males or of females. Joel Rosenberg's reading of Genesis points out the pivotal role of women. For him, it expresses the text's apparent delight in circumventing the most revered human conventions of power, status, and inheritance in order to highlight God's disregard for the trappings of human vanity.

Toscano: You have emphasized scriptures which can be interpreted as promoting equality. But there are many more misogynist texts. I think that most of our scriptures *are* inherently patriarchal, but I think that we can find interpretations that are liberating. What about the Book of Mormon on women? Although this book is for me a profoundly moving and religious text (I first

found grace there), still the absence of women in the book should disturb us. They're completely overlooked. "Ye notice them not" is the phrase used to condemn those who ignore the poor in the Book of Mormon. But women are noticed less than the poor. You talk about Genesis as a text which subverts power structures. I agree that many passages can be interpreted that way, but what about the phrase where the woman's desires are subordinated to her husband, or what about the rib story? You have to admit that there are also texts that seem to encourage a patriarchal view.

Epperson: That's why we have to develop a sense of what is canonical and authoritative for us, now. Every scripture, every law, prohibition, and narrative cannot be equally authoritative. There's a "canon within the canon." You can either repudiate the whole text or you can appropriate the language to include both men and women. This is what we are enjoined to do with the Creation narrative where the intention of God is for the well being of men and women, here and now, as well as in the world to come.

Toscano: You talk about appropriating the scriptural language to include both men and women. I think that it is ironic that the church admonishes us with the Book of Mormon passage to "liken" the scriptures to us. But if we do so, we are likely to get in trouble with the church. It was when I began to appropriate the language of scripture to include myself that I began to be curious about women and the priesthood. When I first started reading the Bible and the Book of Mormon seriously, I realized that I had to identify with men if basic principles such as faith, repentance, and spiritual rebirth were to apply to me. I was only included if I appropriated the male experience. So why shouldn't I identify with Abraham who wants the priesthood? Isn't he the father of all the faithful? But eventually such questions got me in trouble. So I think there is a dangerous aspect in what you're suggesting, Steve.

It's also because of such soul-searching experiences with the scriptures that I have decided it's a mistake to change the historical texts by using gender-inclusive language in translations when it's not in the text. Rather, I like the idea of letting the scriptures stand as witnesses of their own fallibility, while we read and interpret them from gender-inclusive perspectives. But I am in favor of changing the language for the purpose of teaching and for use in worship to include women. So I guess I should say I'm in favor of multiple translations that

show different ways to interpret. But I don't want to go back and completely change the historical text. That's why I like the distinction between the written and the oral Torah because it allows us to maintain the tension between the past and the present while encouraging us to constantly reinterpret. I think that there must also be the acknowledgement that the establishment of the canon in the first place was an interpretive act. What was included and what wasn't included was done in a way that disadvantaged women because of the cultural climate from which the text emerged. But that doesn't justify the continuation of such practices.

Epperson: As long as we place scriptures in the hands of young men and women, unmediated, the "danger" will be there. But the danger is worth it. Otherwise we would prohibit them from reading books and just have scripture preached over the pulpit on Sundays.

Compton: Mormon, and Judeo-Christian, canonized scripture has been strongly "patriarchal," in the sense that they focus chiefly on men (though of necessity there is a matriarchal thread in any human document, sometimes quite deeply buried). Women can approach Mormon, and Judeo-Christian, canonized scripture by mining the buried veins of matriarchal gold of the scriptures, and by recognizing the writing of women, even though they are not yet canonized. The uncanonized writings of women can be entirely worthy of the designation "scripture."

Maleness and femaleness both have capacities for good and evil; in reading archaic texts, feminists can appreciate the veins of male goodness (sometimes deeply buried). In my studies of nineteenth-century Mormon women, I have been impressed by how deeply women loved their sons, as well as their daughters. And men can receive revelation from a Mother in heaven as well as women.

Edwards: Yes, scriptures do tend to be patriarchal; that is, they reflect the male-dominated societies that produced them. This is equally true in Mormonism's "modern scriptures" as it is in biblical times. If I were a woman, I would find it extremely hard to use scripture because of that. We need, as a church, either to rewrite those scriptures we feel free to rewrite on the basis of our knowledge of the equality of persons. Or we need to come to some psychological agreement among ourselves which helps women accept this historical—though not necessarily accurate—presentation. Women surely recognize the value of

scripture, and if they can get beyond the point of being angry over years of improper treatment, they will find help in the scriptures. I for one do not feel the need to create a gender for God. I would be just as happy if I were to discover the feminine gender was a more appropriate use.

Thomas: **How do Mormons use scripture?**

Edwards: How do Mormons use scripture? They don't. It is my observation that very few Mormon ministers use scripture at all. When they do, they use it to give legitimacy to what they have already decided to do. In the RLDS church, most sermons are not exegetical, and a good many sermons are given which have no scriptural base of any kind whatsoever. I think Mormonism is in the unique position of making a great deal of fuss about the importance of its own scripture and, on the other hand, paying very little attention to it.

Toscano: In the LDS church too there is little exegesis, and scripture is mostly used simply as proof-text. However, various Mormon hermeneutics have emerged because people use scripture in different ways in different contexts. Nevertheless, we do not have avenues for understanding and discussing what we are doing in interpretation. At BYU there is a kind of schizophrenia. In the religion department it appears that they are supposed to talk about interpretation and avoid interpretation at the same time. I see a crisis in the church. When I was teaching Sunday school, I felt a hunger among the class members. They wanted exegesis and interpretation; they wanted someone to explain. At the same time there are no official instructions, and private interpretation is discouraged. People are adrift and afraid. The scriptures don't make sense to them, but where are the models for interpretation? I see a serious crisis in this area. Something is going to emerge to address this problem because the need is so great. I hope the response won't simply be restrictive.

Epperson: I don't know how we all interpret them. Anthony Hutchinson's "LDS Approaches to the Holy Bible" in the spring 1992 issue of *Dialogue* (99-125) outlined certain available methods as well as the practices of scriptural interpretation in Mormonism. What I learned from this and from observation is that there is not one model that is available, nor should there be one exclusive method as marching orders for the church. We should therefore avail ourselves of critical/historical methods, literary methods, general authorities, and other sources to try to make sense of these texts. Use them all. More power to you.

But in the end, we are told to "study it out in [our] mind" and then ask for the meaning.

Thomas: **What role does scholarship play and what roles should it play in the study of scripture? What research agenda do you support?**

Epperson: Scholarship is at the very heart of the divine injunction to study, to learn; it is at the heart of our devotional life, however ostensibly secular it may look or feel. The Doctrine and Covenants tells us to teach one another the doctrines of the kingdom, and then it goes on and instructs us to learn things above, below, and on the earth, of the past, of the future, events at home and abroad. It sounds almost like a university curriculum. That's the doctrine of the kingdom. It ought to bring the student and the scholar into a resemblance of the divine likeness. God is the prototype; his glory is intelligence. Intelligence comes from the Latin word for perception. It is simply perceiving the world, including its religious dimension. The ground of the scholar and of scholarship is holy ground. It is time for scholars to stop being defensive about what they do. The burden of proof should be upon those who question its role. Scholarship is part of our human equipment. God gave us minds to serve and to redeem. In the Creation story, God is depicted as having concluded, after surveying his handiwork, that "It is very good." If he wanted us to be merely instinctual animals, he would have given us different equipment. We have been given rational equipment for his glory and for the betterment of the people who live in this world. Scholarship is an essential part of the devotional life of this people.

Toscano: I agree, but how do we create a climate that is conducive to what you're describing? I feel torn. When I am at the university, I feel ashamed of my spirituality. In the church I feel defensive about my intelligence. I don't think I should, but I do anyway. In both contexts I feel I have to hide many of my feelings and opinions if I want to be accepted. Recently at the University of Utah when I took my doctoral exams, I was subtly attacked because I believe in God. Certain members of my committee who know that I'm a believer (although they don't know what I believe) assumed that this was tainting my work on medieval mystics. When I go to church, I'm seen as an intellectual who must therefore only see things from a secular, non-believing viewpoint. If they only knew me, they would understand that this is ludicrous. For me scholarship is a de-

votional experience because it stretches my experience and understanding. But I don't see a place where this merging of devotion and scholarship has happened. I feel people forcing me into one place or another. And I don't like it. But I don't know what the alternative is right now.

Epperson: I'm becoming impatient with both camps. To deny either rationality or spirituality is to deny me, period! To deny that of me is to repudiate what has been given me by the Creator. So I must say to scholars and colleagues who are doing that to me that they are doing something akin to assault or rape, because they are denying something that is absolutely essential to my personality. People who are doing this need to have it pointed out to them. But I think that it is also absolutely incumbent upon us to turn to our fellow believers and say that the glory of God is intelligence, and to quit trashing intellectuals and the scholarly life.

Our task is to increasingly conform ourselves to the divine likeness. One of the ways that we do that is by using the minds that God has given us to increase light and knowledge for ourselves and for our community. We do that in a variety of ways. It does not exclude what we do on our knees. But it does and it must include what we do in front of a text and when we stand in front of a classroom. We simply need to assert that the life of the mind is devotion. It is worship, period. We should tell our children as they go to school that what they are doing is absolutely essential to their life as a Mormon, as a Christian, and as a creature of God. I think we need to reinterpret the meaning of school. It's not just for the acquisition of knowledge so that we can become little consuming units. It's so that we can become increasingly divine, even while we're learning so-called secular or humanistic subjects. Then maybe we will become human beings. And it's only going to happen when people get up in church and start saying it. Enough of the warfare!

Wright: I take this question to mean what roles does and should scholarship play *in the church.* It's necessary to distinguish, for the moment, between three different types of scholarship (here I am simplifying a complex situation): (a) dogmatic-didactic scholarship, (b) tradition-supporting, apologetic scholarship, and (c) academically based and sanctioned scholarship. The first has the goal of elucidating the traditional view of scripture, often correlating statements of church leaders with scriptural passages. It is conservative and harmonistic in its

tendency. This is found in church manuals and books on scripture by, for example, some religious education professors at BYU. The second type uses many of the tools of the third but selectively employs them to support what the tradition already believes. It is conservative, and if revisionist, only to the extent that it ultimately sustains the major points of the tradition. This is found, for example, in the work of Hugh Nibley and in many of the works published by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). The third is marked by a willingness to discuss various solutions to problems, and it thrives where various solutions are set in competition with each other in the academic community. While flourishing in other religious traditions and at universities, it is attested more on selected scriptural subjects or in the margins of Mormonism (*Dialogue* and *Sunstone*). This approach is generally rejected by the church because of its non-conservative tendency.

But, in rejecting critical scholarship, the church is ignoring one of the most important sources of knowledge about scripture. Take Bible scholarship, for example. Over the past one hundred and fifty years new material and documentary finds as well as improved methods for studying texts have produced a revolution in the understanding of Israelite, Jewish, and Christian history, culture, and texts. Mormonism has, somewhat understandably, kept this study at arm's length because its conclusions generally conflict with the views of the church. But neglecting this study is analogous to rejecting the last one hundred and fifty years of medical, genetic, geological, and astronomical science. Just as Mormonism has generally embraced advances in these other fields, so it needs to come out of the past and embrace critical study of scripture.

How might the church embrace this scholarship? It need not codify its results. This would be replacing one list of dogmas with another. Rather, it could allow the work of critical scholarship to proceed at its colleges and university as part of the institutions' academic activities. The church could provide means, as it has in the past, to help its young women and men gain expertise at the top universities. It could encourage its scholars to "popularize" the conclusions of scholarship for the members of the church and bring these into lessons for perspective. It could encourage theological study, which will certainly be necessary to make sense of Mormonism's evolving tradition. General authorities, too, might educate themselves

better about non-Mormon biblical scholarship. The leadership's lack of training in these areas has made it, in my view, incapable of understanding and dealing effectively with scholarly issues surrounding scripture.

Compton: Scholarship establishes and preserves a text and helps understand its literal meaning. If there is serious interest in a book that has been accepted as scripture, scholarly tools must be used to preserve and understand it. Scholarship also helps us interpret the text, although this starts getting into theology. Good theology is dependent on good scholarship.

I propose that Mormons study their texts skillfully, seriously, and honestly on the philological, cultural, and theological levels. In addition, we should recognize other uncanonized scriptures within our tradition and apply the same tools to their interpretation. We ought to identify both the places of high spirituality and the places of imperfection in scripture. Finally, I think that we will not know Mormonism unless we leave it. So I am suggesting that we need to place Mormonism and its scriptures in the wider context of the history of religion.

Thomas: **What do you like and what would you change about the way we understand and use scripture?**

Wright: Critical study of scripture reveals that it is less the word *of* God and more the humans' words *about* God (even those parts which on the surface appear to cite God's words). It is thus that the host of contradictions as well as scientific and historical inaccuracies in it are to be explained. Being generally human reflection, scripture's value lies in showing how people throughout history have perceived the divine, and have sought to make sense of life and the world in which they live. The collective wisdom in these works becomes a guide and a foundation upon which readers in a later community can build. But, being human words, scripture is subject to questioning. While attempts should be made to understand it in the historical and cultural context in which it arose, what is morally questionable, for example, may be protested and even rejected. Such a struggle with scripture can be advantageous in that it can lead an individual or group to clearer moral perspectives.

Compton: I like the fact that we have the ideal of studying scripture seriously. I like the idea of an open canon. But I don't like our tendency to read only the canonized scripture, and the understanding that limits scripture to four books. And I don't

like our tendency to read the scriptures without learning about the socio-historical background of the text.

I don't like our almost exclusive use of the King James Version of the Bible. I liken this to going to the dentist and submitting to seventeenth-century dental techniques. The King James Version was translated from late, inferior texts, and so is often incorrect. True love of scripture will demand that we develop and use the best text available. I don't like our poorly annotated editions of the scriptures (compare them, for example, with the wonderful Oxford annotated *New Revised Standard Version).*

Epperson: What I like is that we are, in spite of everything, a community that is officially committed to these texts and to our engagement with them. We are encouraged to read them. We are encouraged to liken these texts to ourselves. We encounter them as authoritative for us. All of this is very, very good.

I'd like to see us, however, identify a hierarchy of norms within scriptural texts. To identify those texts which critically command and judge us. For example, the supreme norm of the Hebrew Bible is summarized in Deuteronomy 6:4-6, "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God *is* one LORD." Here is a statement against idolatry, about the unity of God, which means that all human endeavor, devotion, intentionality need to be subordinated to God's will for the liberation and redemption of his children. Those kinds of norms in the Bible (getting back to this idea of canon) need to be set up against what we say and what we do which deviate from the norm. Do our actions correspond to it, do they promote it or militate against it? Are we eroding the will of God, the intentionality of God for human well-being? Are we likening ourselves and conforming ourselves to the divine likeness? And if not, then our words and deeds need to change.

Toscano: I like the Mormon idea of an open canon. I also like our idea that no text is free from error, even scripture. There are also two things that I would like to see changed. First, I would like there to be an admission that interpretation is inherent in reading. With this there should be the acknowledgement that interpretations have changed in the church over the years and that leaders have disagreed on how to interpret. Second, I would like to see the church accept the legitimacy and necessity of private interpretation of scripture. If people are reading the scriptures in any kind of meaningful way, they will come to their own conclusions. This doesn't mean that private inter-

pretations have to be accepted as official church doctrine; canon should be established in other ways. I would like to see encouragement for people to talk and write about scriptures because that is the only way scriptures can be relevant. So, in general, I would like to see greater openness and tolerance for differing approaches. I don't see this as harmful to faith but as a means of increasing individual and group spirituality.

Thomas: **Can one believe that the Book of Mormon is fiction and still be a good Mormon?**

Epperson: I thought that a tree is known by its fruits. Whether one is a good Mormon or not depends on the quality of that person's life.

Wright: From a technical point of view, one cannot openly believe that the book is not historical and have full rights and privileges in the Utah church. However, it is possible if one keeps his or her view quiet, as authorities made clear in the wake of the 1993-95 excommunications. If you want a moral answer to the question, I would say, "Yes."

Toscano: I think that it is interesting that you use the phrase, "good Mormon." What about, "Can you be a Mormon and believe that the Book of Mormon is not historical?" I wish that the answer were "yes." I wish that we didn't define membership with a narrow belief system or a simplistic, unthinking allegiance to church leaders. Unfortunately, the recent excommunications seem to indicate that this is present church policy. And while I wish that we didn't exclude people from the group because of their beliefs about what is historical and literal, as scholars we cannot get away from these questions entirely because of the claims of Joseph Smith and the Mormon belief in the literal nature of the spiritual realm. However, as scholars I wish that we would get away from our almost exclusive use of historical and literal readings of scriptural texts, and our simple dichotomies between history and fiction, and between belief and non-belief.

Compton: Right or wrong, non-historicist Mormons are profoundly loyal to the Mormon tradition and to God, who reveals all truth. They are courageous for trying to work out a faith without historicist Mormon scriptures. But they will not receive thanks from the fundamentalist core of the church.

The strength and vitality of a religious movement lies in its fundamentalists, not its intellectuals and scholars. Mormonism (and I am speaking of the Utah church) is committed to a fairly fundamentalist vision, and yet it strongly urges edu-

cation, honesty, and freedom of inquiry. These two poles are in conflict. Add to this a few fundamentalists at the top of a rigidly authoritarian ecclesiastical pyramid, and we have a modern Mormon bomb waiting to go off. The recent excommunications and the firings at BYU may be only the first rumblings of a major disruption in Mormonism.

Edwards: Can one believe the Book of Mormon is fiction and still be a good Mormon? I have no idea. If you mean by "fiction" that the Book of Mormon is a novel written for entertainment purposes, then I suspect that that thought would make it difficult for many people to take Mormonism very seriously. However, if you mean by "fiction" that it is mythological, telling us truths without telling us the truth, then I suspect you would be describing most scriptures. My personal feeling is that many people in the RLDS church do not have any feelings one way or another about the Book of Mormon, and yet find in Mormonism an extremely important religious conviction.

Thomas: **We are all aware of various scriptural narratives which are fictional forms, such as the parables of Jesus. Why then does Mormon research focus so heavily on when its scriptures were written?**

Edwards: I suspect it has something to do with proving one's identity. Mormonism, in all its phases, has gone to a great deal of effort to prove that its founding story is correct. For at least the RLDS, the movement now is to get away from historical verification and begin some serious theological undertakings. My guess is that if Mormonism, in all of its facets, ever comes to grips with itself, ever stops defending itself as an adolescent child defends a love affair, then we will stop trying to prove and to date scriptural behavior. After all, it makes little difference, doesn't it, when or where God speaks if, in fact, God speaks?

Compton: If we accept the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham as non-historical, are we not then faced with a view of Joseph Smith as lacking miraculous prophetic power, and in fact being deceptive, brilliantly deceptive, to some extent? Would not this view undermine the Mormon claims of being the only true church with true priesthood and authority on the earth?

I think that both avenues of research (historicist and non-historicist) research should be pursued energetically. And though Book of Mormon studies is not my research focus, I have found convincing evidence on both sides of the issue. I don't see the two different avenues as opposed to each other;

careful scholarship from both perspectives is useful.

If Mormon scripture is non-historical, it would be a bitter, tragic pill for conservative Mormons to swallow. Then the sooner Mormons start to deal with it, the better. It is very important for non-historicists who are working to stay within the community to express their viewpoint in positive, creative, compassionate ways.

Epperson: If Mormon studies focus heavily on when they were written, I would ascribe it the canons of biblical research which respond to the Enlightenment demand for evidence as a presupposition to informed faith and opinion. We tend not to say, with Tertullian, "I believe because it is absurd." To those who are doing historical research, or research on chronology or material culture, I would say, "Burn the midnight oil!" Then let them test their hypotheses in the light of day. The big mistake would be to mock what they are doing. Or to mock or deride the process of inquiry. One may criticize the results, but that is another matter.

Toscano: In addition to Enlightenment principles, I think that there is something about the practical nature of Mormonism as an American religion that comes into play here too. Mormon theology very much emphasizes the practical, everyday aspect of religion and the literal nature of things: we are the literal descendants of Abraham, a real Zion will be established, God has a body, there is a real heaven, there is a resurrection of real, physical bodies. Seeing things literally means that you will ask when and where events happened or will happen, even spiritual events. While part of our literal-mindedness can be connected with a fundamentalist strain, another part can be connected with the modern and progressive American reaction against European traditions which put God and the spiritual realm out of popular reach. I see both positive and negative tendencies in our approach. The fact that we are literal-minded means that we don't denigrate, at least in theory, the body and the physical earthly realm. Of course, in postmodern discourse the body is everything! I see Mormon theology as being very forward looking in this way. Also, because of our literal-mindedness, the here and the now is emphasized, and we believe that this life is important in itself. We don't spiritualize everything away or defer all solutions to the next life. This can lead to social and political activism. Although this doesn't always happen, our theology gives us this possibility. The negative aspect of our literalism is that we

have a terrible understanding of symbolism and anything other than historical exegesis in the church. This is true of both scholars and the membership of the church at large. On the whole, we do not do well with the mythical/symbolic mode of interpretation.

Wright: We focus on historical setting of scripture for at least three reasons: (1) Mormonism is based on miracle and this involves supposed historical records. It may not be necessary for the endowment story or the parables of Jesus to be historical, but it is different with the historical claims which are part of a miracle. If their claims are not borne out, the grand miracle disappears, at least one that is immediately tangible and visible. (2) The historical claims behind the miracle are in fact open to doubt. This creates a need to focus on this problem. (3) Joseph Smith, apart from his scripture, founded much of his teaching upon acceptance of the Bible as a more or less accurate historical record (he had a quasi-fundamentalist view of scripture). This historical view of scripture informs Mormonism.

Some have said that, given the problems with the Book of Mormon's historicity, it should be approached much like a parable and be read ahistorically. This approach would, for me, be unsatisfying. The meaning of a text is tightly bound up with the context in which it was produced. Meaning would be lost if the context is not brought into play.

Thomas: **If you were asked by the church to serve on a committee to revise the canon, what would you add and what would you delete? Or would you keep them as they are now? Why?**

Edwards: If I were asked by the church to serve on a committee to revise the canon, I would refuse. But, I suppose if I could wave a magic wand and make some things happen, I would delete sexism, racism, violence, organizational and human resource statements, and clean up as many of the inconsistencies as I could. However, if I did that, there would be so little left it would hardly be worth the effort to keep them.

Toscano: I'm the kind of person who doesn't want to delete anything—even stuff that I absolutely hate. In fact, for me one of the wonderful things about our current scriptural canon is that it contains many contradictions. This should make us think about how those contradictions came to be, and about the complexity of religious and textual history. It should give us a sense of irony about ourselves and about our tradition. I did a Sunday school lesson once on Doctrine and Covenants 121, which contains things that I both hate and love. It has the memorable ad-

monition, which we are all fond of quoting, against the abuse of priesthood power; it's also filled with the rhetoric of divine revenge and anger. I love the fact that the revelation contains both, because it makes me face my own desires for both revenge and justice, mercy and kindness. It cautions me against seeing righteousness in sterile, one-sided ways. Dealing honestly with the hard passages in the scriptures makes us question our basic assumptions; it asks us to be humble and to admit our mistakes, individual and institutional; and it suggests that God is maybe bigger than any of our narrow interpretations. Though I don't want to delete anything, I would like to add new material (and thus increase the possibility of contradiction!). I wish we had a way of seeing the writings of women as sacred, scriptural and canonical. I wish we could at least discuss the possibilities and questions. For example, the hymn "O My Father," by Eliza R. Snow, is it canonical or not? And what does that imply?

Wright: Mormonism has a belief in an open canon. This could be used to advantage to rectify some of the deficiencies of the present canon. The main deficiency is the lack of women's voices and examples presented in women's own words. President Spencer W. Kimball encouraged Latter-day Saints to write in their journals because someday their writings might become scripture. The leadership could make good on this and add experiences from the journals of exemplary women. If it is objected that a story is not a fitting genre for scripture, that scripture should be revelation, it should be noted that much of the Bible and Book of Mormon is presented as story, not revelation. Augmenting the canon with example rather than directive could be quite salutary. And if one moves in this direction, one could think that the stories of minorities and, yes, even *lay* men could be included.

I would also encourage a movement to a critical approach to scripture. Part of this would be making available the basic results of scholarship. I would like to see scripture editions produced much like the *New Oxford Annotated Bible,* the *New Jerusalem Bible,* or the *New American Bible,* with short introductions and exegetical notes (a short commentary) incorporating the conclusions of scholarship. I would also like to see Mormons produce their own scholarly translation of the Bible.

Epperson: Heaven forbid that committees alone would decide what is canonical and not canonical. I would never serve on one. Canon is determined over time by consensus of the commu-

nity. Informal canonization and decanonization is going on all of the time as the community appropriates, as it reads, as it reflects upon scripture. That reflects the reality that scriptures must be interpreted, and the act of reading and appropriating is transactional. That is precisely the reason I fear televised or cinematic versions of scriptures, history, and worship. Television and films induce passivity. And you don't learn when you're just sitting there.

I really feel that there was a divine wisdom in the formulation and redaction of scripture, of Israel's scripture, of the scriptures of the church, both primitive and contemporary. As Margaret pointed out, scripture includes what is seemingly adversarial, models of covenant, multiple Creation accounts, querulous prophets, priestly codes, poetry. All of them are lumped together. We are thereby enjoined to engage them and to get involved in this wonderful conversation, this great convocation of voices of people who have been trying to come to grips with their own view of reality and life with God and each other.

Compton: I'd like to discuss Steve's idea of scripture as authoritative texts. I don't know if I just have problems with authority in Mormonism, but I think that scriptures should go beyond our little scriptures. In practice, we only have four books. We do not believe in anything but four texts. Isn't canon a straightjacket?

Epperson: The very reason that we need a written canon is *because* there is a problem with authority. We have a written canon for a reason, and the reason is extremely important. I think that there needs to be a defined and limited text to which a community has consented, by which it is governed, burdened, afflicted. Then that community must determine what in that canon is most expressive of the divine command to them at a particular time. It is important, because there are a lot of texts in that canon that would enjoin us to live a kind of life that should *not* become models for behavior. There are also all kinds of contemporary texts that should *not* be considered as models for behavior. That's the reason why it's so important to have a criterion, a written canon, and a contemporary hierarchy of norms that stand over and against attempts to convince us to behave heartlessly, violently, maliciously. The criterion for Christians is the life, the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

Toscano: What Steve is outlining is a sophisticated and open-minded approach. I don't observe this actually happening. Do people

see that there are contradictions or that all scriptural texts should not be binding on us in the same way, or that some stories may be advocating something that is wrong? I'm glad such problems are there though. As long as they are there and we hold these texts to be sacred, maybe eventually we will deal with the contradictions and problems involved in defining texts as authoritative.

Epperson: I think the task of an oral Torah, or of contemporary revelation, is to find ways in which the criterion within the written Torah can be made concrete, vivid, and compelling in contemporary circumstances. That's the responsibility facing people who grapple with these texts. Then they begin the work of exposition, persuasion, and consensus-building.

Toscano: But that's not how I see them used. Nor do I see many people grappling with them. Usually the scriptures are used as proof-texts to validate whatever idol we're most fond of at the present time. And of course that's true of not only Mormonism, but of religions in general. We justify the things that we want to justify by using the authority of scripture and the name of God.

Epperson: That's why it's so important for each generation to determine after a great deal of humility, research, and sweat, what is authoritative from that scripture.

Toscano: But who sheds any blood, sweat, and tears? I don't see much scripture study in the church. The important thing is that you read them for the prescribed amount of time to show that you are active. God forbid that you should actually understand something that you read! That's the first step to apostasy. For most members, the scriptures are authoritative because they back up church policy. I hear people in the church say all the time, "We know that this is true because the scriptures say . . ." And you ask, "Where is that in the scriptures?" And of course it isn't there, but members think that it is because they think that the canon is there to back up the authority of the LDS church. That's what they mean by authoritative text. We use the scriptures to reinforce whatever we want to reinforce.

Thomas: **Scriptures, then, are being used merely as tools for power?**

Epperson: Proof-texting is as much an emasculating of the body of scripture as is recondite source criticism that is not connected to the life of the church. We need to determine the whole message of the text. Are our words, our lives, and our deeds judged, corrected, and inspired by those words? If they're not, then there is something wrong with us, not with the text (not if we accept

that text as canonical).

Toscano: I see a contradiction here. Why can't there be something wrong with the text? And who has the right to make that determination? The fact that it may be canonical and compelling doesn't mean that there can't be something wrong with it. Aren't we all compelled by what empowers us?

Epperson: Then the canon is really one's prejudice and not an inspired text. The norm within the written canon must be used to shoot down false canons and norms.

Thomas: **Thank you all for a very thought-provoking discussion.**