

# Laban's Ghost: On Writing and Transgression

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IN HIS 1955 CLASSIC WORK, *TRISTES TROPIQUES*, French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss recorded a story of unintended social impact evoked by his introduction of writing to the illiterate Nambikwara of tropical Brazil. Several days after Levi-Strauss distributed paper and pencils as gifts to the Nambikwara, one of the chiefs pulled a piece of paper from a basket of gifts that the anthropologist had asked the chief to disperse. Levi-Strauss watched in bewilderment as the chief, apparently mimicking him, began authoritatively reading the wavy lines inscribed on the piece of paper as if they were instructions for the appropriate allocation of the goods.

The sudden employment of writing as a tool of authority by one of their chiefs irritated the Nambikwara who had been accompanying Levi-Strauss as guides. Partially in retaliation for the offense generated by this incident, Levi-Strauss found himself abandoned in the forest with no idea of which way to go and spent a sleepless night reflecting on the surprising episode of which he had been an unwitting protagonist. Years later he wrote:

Writing had, on that occasion, made its appearance among the Nambikwara but not, as one might have imagined, as a result of long and laborious training. It had been borrowed as a symbol, and for a sociological rather than an intellectual purpose, while its reality remained unknown. It had not been a question of acquiring knowledge, of remembering or understanding, but rather of increasing the authority and prestige of one individual—or function—at the expense of others.<sup>1</sup>

Levi-Strauss hypothesized that when writing first emerged “it seems to have favoured the exploitation of human beings rather than their en-

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1. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 296-98.

lightenment." He proposed that "the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery" and argued that "the use of writing for disinterested purposes, and as a source of intellectual and aesthetic pleasure, is a secondary result, and more often than not it may even be turned into a means of strengthening, justifying or concealing" the sociological use of writing.<sup>2</sup>

Following Levi-Strauss, I propose that when writing is viewed simply as a source of enlightenment it conceals a network of possibly exploitative social relations. In the case of Mormonism, writing both conceals and shapes social relations. The Book of Mormon was presented by Joseph Smith as a history of the American Indians, a bridge between the historical Judeo-Christian tradition and a people not originally part of that written history.<sup>3</sup> Although the author of this new scripture proclaimed that God was impartial, the text masked disparate power relations between American Indians and European colonizers. The LDS church, which emerged after publication of the Book of Mormon, challenged the revelatory monopoly that the Protestant Reformation had assigned to the Bible and attached eternal significance to the written word. It thus reified the practice of writing, which has since shaped Mormon practice and belief through the production of new scriptures, extensive record keeping, and an emphasis on correlated instructional materials and genealogical production of salvation. In the past few years Mormon scholars and feminists have used the written word to challenge and limit the power and authority of church leaders. In so doing they have offended those general authorities who claim to represent the God of the record keepers. The writings of scholars and feminists, like those of their church leaders (endowed with the revelatory authority of Logos), also disguise contested social relations hidden within the written word. This contest over the written word is itself shaped by the reification or fetishization of writing as an administrative and an enlightening device of both humans and gods.

To begin this examination of writing within Mormonism I first offer a theoretical overview in which I engage Mormon scriptures (Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price) in a dialogue with the theories of Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Clifford Geertz. I then discuss the story of Nephi's murder of Laban in which it is dramati-

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2. *Ibid.*, 298-99.

3. Like most Euro-Americans in the nineteenth century, the author of the Book of Mormon categorized the American Indians as a single group (the Lamanites). Such a categorization disguises the diversity of indigenous cultures in the Americas. When I use terms such as "a people" in reference to American Indians, I do not intend to reflect the reality of ancient America in which there was no such cohesion but to represent Euro-American perceptions of the indigenous groups they encountered in America.

cally proposed that Logos, the divine word or reason incarnate in Jesus Christ, cannot exist without a written record. My exegesis of the story of Laban is supplemented by comparisons with contests over the written word in the Protestant Reformation and some reflections by some Euro-Americans on the encounter between Europeans and the peoples of the New World. Finally, I revisit recent conflicts between Mormon leaders and intellectuals and suggest that this struggle is being primarily fought through and over the privileged use of the written word.

#### THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Nineteenth-century French sociologist Emile Durkheim observed that humans draw their cosmology from aspects of their own social environment.<sup>4</sup> Writing has played an essential role in the formation, history, and evolution of Mormon cosmology and institutions. The ambitious endeavors of many Latter-day Saints in record keeping and genealogy are believed to have not only temporal but immortal significance.<sup>5</sup> For example, Mormon scriptures proclaim that God will judge humans "out of the books which shall be written" (2 Ne. 29:11), that "whatsoever you record on earth shall be recorded in heaven, and whatsoever you do not record on earth shall not be recorded in heaven" (D&C 128:8), that "all things are written by the Father" (3 Ne. 27:26), that the names of the righteous are recorded in the "book of life" (Alma 5:58), and that apostates and unbelievers whose names "are not found written in the book of law ... shall not find an inheritance among the saints of the Most High" (D&C 85:11), while the righteous who enter the celestial kingdom will be given a white stone on which a new name, a key word for admittance, is written (130:11).

Reliance upon writing in the contemporary world is projected by the authors of Mormon scriptures into the heavens with profound implications for the afterlife. Salvation, for Mormons, is predicated on information recorded both on earth and in heaven. The Mormon God commands a massive bureaucracy which observes and records human actions on earth. This heavenly bureaucracy duplicates the record keeping efforts of

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4. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: The Free Press). Durkheim's own reifications of social structure, however, should be recognized as such; see Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 9.

5. See Alex Shoumatoff, *The Mountain of Names: A History of the Human Family* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985); M. Guy Bishop, "What Has Become of Our Fathers? Baptism for the Dead at Nauvoo" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23 (Summer 1990): 85-97; and Grant Underwood, "Baptism for the Dead: Comparing RLDS and LDS Perspectives" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23 (Summer 1990): 99-105.

Mormons on earth. If records are not kept on earth, then none are kept in heaven. One's salvation depends on the performance of various ordinances on earth *and* the recording of those ordinances in heaven which is possible only if they are first recorded on earth.

In his analysis of commodity as both thing and social relation, Karl Marx derived the concept of commodity fetishism to describe the manner in which social relations among people assume "the fantastic form of a relation between things."<sup>6</sup> In the case of Mormonism, written records, whether scripture, genealogy, or scholarly treatises, exist not simply as physical objects but, like the commodity, are imbued with a fantastic form (which I call an eternal significance) that masks power relationships among individuals and groups of individuals. Yet, in this essay, I am not seeking simply to illuminate the "really real" between the lines of text on a written page. Rather, along with Clifford Geertz, I argue that an examination of writing in Mormonism is sociologically interesting not simply because it helps to "describe the social order ... but because ... it shapes it."<sup>7</sup>

The author of the Book of Mormon addressed the paradox of an impartial God who sanctioned imbalanced social relations between European immigrants and American Indians. In order to portray an apparently partial God as impartial, this narrator suggested cosmic explanations, what Geertz has called "a gloss upon the mundane world of social relationships and psychological events."<sup>8</sup> These cosmic explanations accounted for the contradictions and ambiguities that readers in the nineteenth century found in their own society. By positing, through the story of Nephi's murder of Laban, that a differential access to Logos separated literate societies from non-literate ones, the narrator provided readers with a plausible explanation for social and racial inequality. Yet this logocentric synopsis served not simply as a gloss for contemporary social relationships in the early nineteenth century, but served and continues to

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6. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward B. Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 72.

7. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 119. Jean Jackson argued that "in a modern bureaucratic state a document can have a major role in creating the reality; whether you're married or not finally depends on the validity of the marriage license, rather than on your intentions and assumptions at the time" (see "'I Am a Fieldnote': Fieldnotes as a Symbol of Professional Identity," in Roger Sanjek, ed., *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990], 32). Perhaps Mormonism borrowed this reification of writing from emerging bureaucratic states. See Robert W. Hefner, "World Building and the Rationality of Conversion," in *Christian Conversion in Cultural Context*, Robert Hefner, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3-44.

8. Geertz, 124.

serve as a basis for shaping present and future relationships in the LDS church.<sup>9</sup>

#### WRITING AND ITS ABSENCE

One way to assess the role of writing in Mormon theology is to ask what Mormonism would be like without the written word. This question has been asked, indirectly, in the story of Nephi's assassination of Laban. In this narrative Lehi and his family had just embarked on a journey that they believed would isolate them from the historical traditions of religious leaders in Jerusalem (see 1 Ne. 3-4). Prompted by a dream, Lehi asked his sons Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi to return to Jerusalem and acquire, from a man called Laban, a collection of brass plates that contained "the five books of Moses ... a record of the Jews [and] the prophecies of the holy prophets" (5:11-13). The eldest brother, Laman, who along with Lemuel would become the progenitors of the dark-skinned race in the Americas (Lamanites), first attempted and failed to acquire the plates. Under the initiative and leadership of Laman's younger brother Nephi, who along with Sam would become the progenitors of an ancient light-skinned race in the Americas (Nephites), the brothers made a second attempt to acquire the plates. This time they tried to purchase the plates with gold, silver, and other precious things that they collected from their abandoned home. Laban, however, stole the items, refused to deliver the plates, and instead sent his guards to kill the four young men. The brothers escaped and began to quarrel until they were interrupted by an angel. The angel rebuked Laman and Lemuel for striking Nephi and advised them that Nephi had been chosen by the Lord to rule over them because of their iniquities.

Following this intervention Nephi returned, alone, to the city, encountered a drunken Laban, and was ordered by the Spirit to murder him. Initially reluctant to take the life of another human, Nephi was reprimanded by the Spirit who informed him that "the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle in unbelief" (1 Ne. 4:13). Nephi recalled that the Lord previously told him that "Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise" and that the law of Moses which they must obey "was engraved upon the plates of brass" (vv. 14-16). Submitting to the authority

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9. Susan F. Harding argued that conversion is a process of acquiring a specific religious language. See "Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion," *American Ethnologist* 14 (1987): 167-81. Following Harding, one might argue that the written word holds a privileged space in the religious language of Mormonism. To convert to Mormonism is to accept the fetishization of writing, to find Logos in the written word (see Moro. 10:1-4).

of the Spirit, Nephi decapitated Laban and took not only the brass plates but the sword with which he killed him.

Noel B. Reynolds, a political scientist at Brigham Young University, has argued that the writings of Nephi in the Book of Mormon "can be read as a political tract or a 'lineage history,' written to document the legitimacy of Nephi's rule and religious teachings."<sup>10</sup> Read as part of a founding constitution of the white Nephites, the story of Nephi's murder of Laban presents Laman, the father of dark-skinned Lamanites, as subordinate to Nephi who was chosen by God to rule over him and his descendants. As the eldest brother, Laman had the first opportunity to obtain the plates, but his failure, together with the subsequent angelic intervention, validated the right of Nephi and his descendants to be both the record keepers and divinely sanctioned rulers over the non-literate Lamanites.

What made the acquisition of the plates so vital that God would sanction murder (see Alma 39:3-5; D&C 49:21)? There was something special, something unique, about these brass plates. They were not just a genealogy or a narrative; they were a written record that included the law of Moses. The Spirit told Nephi that without the plates his descendants would "dwindle and perish in unbelief" (1 Ne. 4:13). The hidden presupposition in this statement is that belief, or at least the "true" belief sought by Nephi, could not exist independent of the written word. All belief by illiterate persons and cultures, not informed by the written word, was preemptively invalidated by the Spirit conversing with Nephi. Laman's failure to obtain the plates served as an explanation for the lack of writing and thereby belief among the Lamanites and by implication (for readers in the nineteenth century) the American Indians.<sup>11</sup> The sociological significance of this narrative is the claim that *without writing there can be no belief*.

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10. Noel B. Reynolds, "The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates," *Brigham Young University Studies* 27 (Fall 1987): 15.

11. Since the time of Joseph Smith, Mormons have consistently used the label of Lamanites for all Native Americans. In recent decades, though, this usage has come under criticism and appears to be declining in official publications but is still common in popular Mormon discourse. See Eugene England, "Lamanites' and the Spirit of the Lord," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (Winter 1985): 25-31; Lacey A. Harris, "To Be Native American—and Mormon," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (Winter 1985): 143-52; Keith Parry, "Joseph Smith and the Clash of Sacred Cultures," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (Winter 1985): 65-80; Arturo De Hoyos, "'I Am a Lamanite ...,'" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19 (Fall 1986): 15-17; Steve Pavlik, "Of Saints and Lamanites: An Analysis of Navajo Mormonism," *Wicazo SA Review* 8 (Spring 1992): 21-30; and Thomas W. Murphy, "Imagining Lamanites: Constructions of Self and Other in the Book of Mormon," privately circulated, 1996.

## THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION AND THE BIBLE

In the Mormon world view one must have a book in which Logos—the Truth—is to be found. One can “believe” only after knowing Logos. In a way the tale of Nephi’s murder of Laban is an elaborate re-enactment of some of the central tensions dividing a Europe forever altered by the Protestant Reformation. The conflict between Protestants and Catholics drew upon a long tradition in which the written law was a site of contention in early Judaism and Christianity.<sup>12</sup> Protestantism in contra-distinction to Catholicism offered a relationship with God in which Logos was no longer mediated by the authority of the priest. Instead a more direct relationship was proposed, one mediated only by the Bible. In their emphasis on the Bible the leaders of the Protestant Reformation transferred the mediation of the imbalance of power between God and parishioner from the priest to the Bible, the word of God. The imbalance of power between God and parishioner did not disappear, rather it took on an alternative mask, the Bible.

Before the emergence of the printing press, manuscript knowledge, although not monolithic, was primarily scarce and arcane lore. Following mass production, print knowledge thrived on reproducibility and dissemination. Between the publication of the Gutenberg Bible and the close of the fifteenth century, forty-odd years later, more than 20 million printed volumes were produced in Europe. By a century later the count rose to between 150 million and 200 million.<sup>13</sup> The initial market for books was a thin stratum of Latin readers in Europe, but that quickly changed.

When Martin Luther nailed his theses to the chapel door in Wittenberg in 1517, his complaints were quickly printed and widely distributed in the vernacular throughout the country in as few as fifteen days. Between 1522 and 1546 as many as 430 whole or partial editions of Luther’s biblical translations appeared. Luther sparked “a colossal religious propaganda war that raged across Europe for the next century.”<sup>14</sup> Advocates of Protestantism challenged the power of the established church through the written word, employed most effectively in the vernacular, while leaders of the Counter-Reformation defended the church through the citadel of Latin. The church buckled but was not destroyed. Protestant churches emerged to stay, their leaders having wielded the newly found power of the mass produced, printed word.

Nephi’s bloody acquisition of the brass plates was not unlike the

12. Gillian Feeley-Harnik, *The Lord's Table: The Meaning of Food in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981), 38, 46, 49, 59, 83.

13. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991), 32-34, 37.

14. *Ibid.*, 39-40.

publication of the Gutenberg Bible and the subsequent violence which tore the written word from the hands of a few elite in the Roman church. Nephi slew Laban to gain access to the written record of the Jews. Through this violent act a copy of the sacred chronicle was transferred from one of Jerusalem's elite to a rebellious prophet leading his family to a new promised land. Authority was transferred from the elite of Jerusalem to a set of brass plates.

#### AMERICA AND THE BIBLICAL SILENCE

When the Spanish conquistadors arrived in the New World after 1492, they sought to undermine the authority of indigenous leaders through the destruction of Mayan and Aztec texts. As a result of the efforts of the conquistadors and missionaries such as Fray Diego de Landa, nearly all pre-Columbian manuscripts in the New World were destroyed. From the few surviving texts and what anthropologists have been able to surmise from archaeological excavation, pre-Columbian writing appears to have been primarily an administrative/political tool of the elite with few records of a historical nature.<sup>15</sup>

There was no printing press or widespread dissemination of books in the New World prior to 1492. Writing was only known in a few societies in Central America, and Spanish invaders quickly eliminated as many traces of that as possible. Two centuries later British colonists invaded illiterate native societies in North America. In response to the destruction of Aztec and Mayan texts by the Spanish and the lack of writing in most North American indigenous societies, English colonizers found an historical void in the New World. There was no book, no Bible, no written sacred history in which to believe.<sup>16</sup> In the terminology of the Book of Mormon, nations were "dwindling in unbelief."

The transition from the brass plates to the gold plates, portrayed in both the product and narrative of the Book of Mormon, exemplified a movement in the status of writing from that of manuscript knowledge as an administrative device and arcane lore to a nineteenth-century text

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15. See Ronald Sanders, *Lost Tribes and Promised Lands: The Origins of American Racism* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1978), 182; Michael Coe, *Mexico*, 3d ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 163; Michael Coe, *The Maya*, 4th ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 178-87; Ronald Wright, *Stolen Continents: The "New World" Through Indian Eyes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1992), 163, 167-71; Friar Diego de Landa, *Yucatan: Before and After the Conquest*, William Gates, trans. (New York: Dover Publications, 1978 [1566]), 13.

16. See Robert Wauchope, *Lost Tribes and Sunken Continents: Myth and Method in the Study of American Indians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 3; Allen H. Godbey, *The Lost Tribes a Myth: Suggestions Toward Rewriting Hebrew History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1930); Gershon Greenberg, *The Holy Land in American Religious Thought, 1620-1948* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994).



written for its reproducibility and dissemination.<sup>17</sup> The author of the Book of Mormon proposed an anachronistic social transformation in the New World at least as early as 1,000 years before a similar upheaval would occur in Europe. In other words, Book of Mormon prophets such as Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni were apparently aware that they were writing and keeping a record for a future mass audience 1,000 years before the emergence of print-capitalism in Europe. For example, Nephi was informed by the Lamb of God that the records he and his people were commanded to keep were to be "hid up, to come forth unto the Gentiles" (1 Ne. 13:35; see also 2 Ne. 3:23, 26:17, 27:6-22, 29:3,11; Morm. 2:17-18, 5:12, 6:6; Moro. 10:1-4).

The Book of Mormon was written as an American scripture, superior to the Protestant Bible. This reproducible American Bible offered liberation to immigrants to the New World from the chains of Europe's Protestant elite, who had previously sought their own liberation by turning from the authority of the papacy to that of the Bible.<sup>18</sup> Primitive Christianity was no longer something that was lived only in the remote past of the Old World, but was posited both in the past and present of the New World. The Book of Mormon offered a rewritten version of the Judeo-Christian tradition and a history of the American continents with an immediacy in the nineteenth century. This apparent act of emancipation for European immigrants to the Americas masked the potential enslaving of the indigenous populations of the New World to a sacred history not of their own creation.

#### LOST TRIBES AND NATIVE RESISTANCE TO WRITING

Beginning with Francisco Lopez de Gomara in the early sixteenth century, Spanish, French, and English authors sought to fill the biblical void on the origin and existence of the American Indians. A sacred his-

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17. For discussions of nineteenth-century messages in the Book of Mormon, see the essays in Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993); B. H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, Brigham D. Madsen, ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985); David Pursuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1985); John A. Price, "The Book of Mormon vs. Anthropological Prehistory" *The Indian Historian* 7 (Summer 1974): 35-40; Michael Coe, "Mormons and Archaeology: An Outside View," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (Summer 1973): 40-48; Dee F. Green, "Book of Mormon Archaeology: the Myths and Alternatives," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4 (Summer 1969): 71-80; Mervin B. Hogan, "'A Parallel': A Matter of Chance versus Coincidence," *Rocky Mountain Mason* 4 (Jan. 1956): 17-31; Wayne Ham, *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought, and Action* 1 (Sept. 1970): 15-22.

18. The theme of a rise from slavery appears to repeat Old Testament patterns; see Sanders, 48; Feeley-Harnik, xiii.

tory, whether mediated by Catholic clergy or directly accessible to Protestant laity, could not be universal if it was silent in regards to two continents full of people. This vacuum was filled with a genre of literature in which the authors attempted to link Native Americans with the sacred texts of the Old World by speculating that the indigenous peoples of the Americas descended from Old World peoples such as those scattered after construction of the tower of Babel or those who remained of the Lost Tribes of Israel.<sup>19</sup>

This textual remaking of the American past accompanied efforts by conquerors and colonists to "transform this 'New' world and its inhabitants, into a likeness of the old."<sup>20</sup> In the Book of Mormon not only was the Judeo-Christian framework extended to ancient America, but the biological transformation of the Americas (in which the peoples, diseases, plants, and animals of the Old World largely displaced those of the New World) was projected back into the ancient past.<sup>21</sup> The American biological, physical, political, and religious environment of the nineteenth century was posited by the author of the Book of Mormon to have existed for at least 1,000 years (600 B.C. to 400 A.D.) in pre-Columbian America.

The Book of Mormon was not the only attempt to produce an American history connecting Old and New Worlds; nor was it the first to meet resistance from American Indians.<sup>22</sup> In 1775 James Adair's *History of the American Indians* contributed to a literary genre started by the Spanish and set the stage for the proliferation in the following century of numerous texts speculating that American Indians originated from the Lost Tribes of Israel. In addition to offering the scenario of lost tribes as a missing link, Adair recorded Native American resistance to the imposition of a new sacred history from the Bible. He wrote that some Indians claimed that though they were "unskillful in making the marks of our ugly lying books, which spoil people's honesty," they were nonetheless "duly taught in the honest volumes of nature."<sup>23</sup>

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19. Godbey, 2; Wauchope, 53; Sanders, 182-83, 186-88, 363, 367; Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 35-52.

20. Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 10. See also Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 12; Anthony Grafton, with April Shelford and Nancy Siraisi, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992), 7.

21. See Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

22. On the difficulties encountered by early Mormon missionaries among the American Indians, see Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985 [1938]).

23. James Adair, *History of the American Indians*, Samuel Cole Williams, ed. (Johnson City, TN: Watauga Press, 1930 [1775]).

Elias Boudinot, whose publication in 1816 of *A Star in the West* followed Adair, paraphrased one American Indian's rejection of the book of God as a text full of "foolish absurdities" and "nonsense."<sup>24</sup> Native resistance to writing continued well after publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830. In an 1854 speech Chief Seattle objected to Christianity because it "was written on tablets of stone by the iron finger of an angry God."<sup>25</sup> Not all resistance to writing, though, came in the form of rejection. Sequoyah, a Cherokee who knew little more of writing except that it existed, developed a phonetic script that was rapidly adopted by the Cherokee as an alternative to the alphabet imposed by European colonizers.<sup>26</sup> Vine Deloria, Jr., has noted that most tribal religions may be distinguished from historical religions such as Christianity because they "did not base their validity on any specific incident ... No Indian tribal religion was dependent upon the belief that a certain thing had happened in the past."<sup>27</sup> The dependence of truth on particular historical events is a foreign idea to societies lacking a sense of rigid chronology.

In spite of the reluctance and suspicion with which many Native Americans approached the written word, Ethan Smith in an 1823 book, *View of the Hebrews*, went to great lengths (reviving previously discredited tales of the discovery of a dark-yellow parchment with ancient Hebrew writing enclosed by a cover of skins near Pittsfield, Massachusetts) to demonstrate that the Indians of North America as well as those in Central America had once had the ability to read and write.<sup>28</sup> In publishing the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith produced evidence that writing (in a peculiar combination of Hebrew and Egyptian) had, in fact, existed in ancient North America and through the assistance of an angel had been preserved, recovered, translated, and was now owned by him.

If ancient writing could be proven to have existed but been lost in ancient North America, these "facts" would lend credence to the proposition supported by Adair, Boudinot, Ethan Smith, and Joseph Smith that contemporary Indians were dark-skinned degenerates suffering from an ancient loss of white civilization and in need of a restoration to an imag-

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24. Elias Boudinot, *A Star in the West; or a Humble Attempt to Discover the Long Lost Ten Tribes of Israel, Preparatory to the Return to their Beloved City, Jerusalem* (Trenton, NJ: D. Fenton and S. Hutchinson & J. Dunham, 1816), 274-75.

25. "Chief Seattle's Speech" was recorded and translated by Henry A. Smith and published in the *Seattle Sunday Star* on 19 October 1887 (Suquamish, WA: The Suquamish Museum, n.d.).

26. Wright, 214-17.

27. Vine Deloria, Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1994), 99-100.

28. Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews: or the Tribes of Israel in America* (Poultney, VT: Smith and Smith, 1825), 130, 217-18, 223.

ined version of their own past.<sup>29</sup> Paralleling the colonial suppression of the spoken languages of the original inhabitants of the Americas, the Book of Mormon first appeared in print in English while its golden original (also in an Old World language) disappeared.

Prophets from the Book of Mormon warned that God's judgments would rest upon unbelievers (2 Ne. 1:10, 26:19; Hel. 4:25), that God would cease to do miracles because of unbelief (Morm. 9:20), that the so-called Lamanites who dwindled in unbelief would not have the book for fear they might destroy it (2 Ne. 26:17), and that because of their unbelief God would bring other nations to the Americas and empower them to take away the land and cause the Lamanites to be scattered and smitten (2 Ne. 1:11). The same God who proclaimed that a written record was a prerequisite for belief also removed the sacred records from unbelievers and only permitted their return after a brutal conquest. The reappearance of the records came in the language of the colonizers. The God of the Book of Mormon regulated access to the written word sanctioning the killing and smiting of those who stood in the way of his divine plan.

The Book of Mormon served as a text that could fill the historical void perceived by European immigrants to the New World. While other Protestant American religions responded to this lack through an over-reliance, perhaps fetishization, of the Bible as an object, Mormons accepted the Bible as the word of God in so far as it was translated correctly and elevated alternative scriptures such as the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price (the texts which Harold Bloom has called the "stunted stepchildren of the Bible"<sup>30</sup>) to the same status. Not only did the Book of Mormon fill the gap of illiteracy and connect the New World to the sacred history of the Old World, but to many people it superseded the oral narratives of Native Americans which are subordinated to the written word as superstitious legends of nations "dwindling in unbelief," unworthy of the word of God.

#### BODILY INSCRIPTIONS

While the text of the Book of Mormon may be read as laying the groundwork for a belief in the equality of races, peoples, and genders, this impartiality is actually undermined by the social implications of the text.<sup>31</sup> Women are generally anonymous appendages to male characters,

29. Thomas W. Murphy, "Searching for Self Amidst Lost Tribes," privately circulated, 1995.

30. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 81, 148, 154, 185, 221.

31. For an attempt to re-interpret the Book of Mormon within a framework of equality, see Eugene England, "'No Respector of Persons': A Mormon Ethics of Diversity," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Winter 1994): 79-100.

categorized with children, or completely ignored (see 1 Ne. 17:1-2; Jacob 2:28; Mosiah 10:5; Alma 54:3).<sup>32</sup> Cultural differences between Lamanites and Nephites are typically described in a manner that assigns pejorative terms, such as blood-thirsty, idolatrous, ferocious, idle, lazy, and filthy, to the dark-skinned Lamanites (1 Ne. 12:23; Enos 1:20; Mosiah 9:12; Alma 22:28, 24:18; Morm. 5:15).<sup>33</sup> Socially constructed racial distinctions are presented as a divinely ordained punitive measure for unrighteousness. This punitive curse appears as a mark, a dark skin inscribed by the hand of God, upon the bodies of the wicked (1 Ne. 2:23; 2 Ne. 5:21-24; Alma 3:6-18, 17:15; Moses 5:40).<sup>34</sup> This dark skin, as a curse from God, was cited as antecedent for other denigrating characteristics: "And because of their cursing which was upon them, they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey" (2 Ne. 5:24). The pretext of equality that appears in the proclamation that the Lord invites "all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, male and female" (2 Ne. 26:33) masks the enslaving potential of representation across disparate social relationships. The making and existence of the Book of Mormon as an authentic document that portrays an American past tied to the racial myths and sacred history of the Old World gives Joseph Smith and his prophetic descendants a dangerous power of representation over the ancient Lamanites depicted in this "word of God."<sup>35</sup>

The Book of Mormon as a golden Bible entered an unequal domain in which it exacerbated, while masking, the disparate power relationship between colonizers and colonized. The pretext is thus set for erasing or

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32. See Lavina Fielding Anderson, "The Grammar of Inequality," in Maxine Hanks, ed., *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 215-30; Lynn Mathews Anderson, "Towards a Feminist Interpretation of Latter-day Scripture," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Summer 1994): 185-203; Melodie Moench Charles, "Precedents for Mormon Women from Scriptures," in Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson, eds., *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 37-63.

33. See Harris; Parry; England, "Lamanites"; David J. Whittaker, "Mormons and Native Americans: A Historical and Bibliographical Introduction," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (Winter 1985): 26-64; Norman Douglas, "The Sons of Lehi and the Seed of Cain: Racial Myths in Mormon Scripture and Their Relevance to the Pacific Islands," *Journal of Religious History* 8 (1974): 90-104.

34. For discussions of writing and the body, see Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); Michael Tausig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 27; Nicholas Dirks, "Introduction," in Nicholas Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 6-7; Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1979).

35. For commentary on gaining power through representation, see Michael Tausig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 13.

denouncing various oral traditions of illiterate groups of Native Americans as well as the few manuscripts that survived the brutality of the Spanish. Offered in place of listening to American Indians was a new book celebrating a Euro-American vision of primitive Christianity and published by a descendant of the same Europeans who assailed the Native Americans and stole their land.

Through publication of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith accomplished, via writing and representation, the same sort of erasure that Bishop Landa sought through brutality, torture, and consuming fire when he destroyed most of the Mayan codices that had survived the initial stages of the conquest. Ronald Sanders has described Landa as "a paragon of the Catholic Reformation of the late sixteenth-century Spain as expressed in the New World." According to this view, "Pre-Catholic documents like the Hebrew Old Testament and the Mayan codices are not valid on their own ... it is only once their elements have been coopted by the only true religion that they become valuable parts of its tradition."<sup>36</sup> In this colonization of people, space, and language, the dominant colonial "views of languages, of recording the past, and of charting territories become synonymous with the real by obstructing possible alternatives."<sup>37</sup>

While Laban's sword symbolized the destructive power of the state, amply exerted by Bishop Landa and the Spanish conquistadors, the brass plates symbolized not simply the enlightenment of Lehi's descendants but the dominating power of the written word. The brass plates were violently seized by Nephi. The gold plates served as engraved definitions of righteousness zealously invoked as the true record of ancient America by Joseph Smith's followers (D&C 3:18, 20, 10:48). Both pen and sword were and are tools of power and domination. While the brute torture on the body of the colonized by Spanish conquistadors was not the same thing as the public exhibition of colonized bodies in the Book of Mormon, these "two moments of colonial power shared in more than they differed."<sup>38</sup>

The Mormon restoration's opening of the windows of heaven challenged the revelatory monopoly assigned by Protestant reformers. With the publication of alternative scriptures, the monopoly was broken and followers of new Mormon religions were empowered with innovative words of God but not without a cost. Illiterate nations were depicted as dwindling in unbelief and their only hope for equality, according to the Book of Mormon, would be through a rejection of the heritage passed down by ancestors in favor of a Christianity imported from the Old

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36. Sanders, 183. See also Landa, 82.

37. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 5.

38. See Dirks, 5.

World and molded by the hands of colonizers. The removal of a dark curse etched by the hand of God could be achieved, Book of Mormon prophets promised, through acceptance of a denigrating record engraved on golden plates (2 Ne. 30:6).<sup>39</sup> To achieve liberation for the poor and downtrodden European colonizers, the Book of Mormon portrayed a divinely sanctioned murder. The oral traditions of indigenous populations were replaced with illusive metal records that legitimated the usurpation of the Americas and were written in Old World languages by colonizers in the New World.

#### ENGRAVED ON GOLD PLATES

Joseph Smith reported directly confronting the question of what might be the ultimate value of a golden Bible. Could it be found in the gold? Or in Logos? A dead white Indian, miraculously resurrected and known as the angel Moroni, appeared to Joseph as a liminal figure between an ancient white civilization and European immigrants in the nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> Moroni presented the young Joseph with a dilemma. In order to obtain this golden Bible from the angel, the incipient prophet had to refuse to use the gold on which the word of God was engraved for financial gain.<sup>41</sup> In return for rejecting the power of riches, Joseph was promised the power instilled in the written word.

Non-Mormon American historian John L. Brooke recently noted that both religion and money in the early nineteenth century "depended upon faith in the legitimacy of printed paper."<sup>42</sup> The Book of Mormon, as a paper record, was like a spiritual treasure "laid up in heaven," while the gold which had been hidden in the earth faded away. The slippery

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39. The post-1981 English version of the Book of Mormon no longer includes the prophecy in 2 Ne. 30:6 that the converted descendants of the Lamanites will become white. Nonetheless, many foreign translations include the prophecy, and similar references in 1 Ne. 2:23; 2 Ne. 5:21-24; Jacob 3:8; Alma 17:15; and 3 Ne. 2:15 have not been removed from the English version. See Thomas W. Murphy, "Re-Inventing Mormonism: Guatemala as Harbinger of the Future?" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 (Spring 1996): 177-92.

40. For a discussion of awakening the dead through metaphorical murder, see Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 143; Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977). On liminality, see Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93-111.

41. Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1987), 7; Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 61-64; D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 112-49; John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of the Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 149-83.

42. Brooke, 227.

golden plates escaped the permanent grasp of a treasure-seeker-turned-prophet. The written record served as paper money without a gold standard.<sup>43</sup> Faith in the gold was misplaced, but a collective faith in the legitimacy of the printed word offered greater promise.

According to the prophets of the Book of Mormon, treasures sealed up in heaven were imbued with eternal significance, those hidden in the earth disappeared (2 Ne. 9:30; 12:7; Hel. 5:8; 13:18-20, 35; Morm. 1:18). True legitimacy, according to this record, was found within the writing itself, not with the precious metals that backed the printed paper. Those who placed their faith in metal would watch it fade away, while those whose faith was bound to the written word would find an eternal reward.

The pursuit of wealth and power through acquisition and display was denounced in the Book of Mormon (Jacob 1:16, 2:13, 2:18; Mosiah 2:12, 12:29, 29:40; Alma 4:6, 4:12, 7:6, 39:14; Hel. 12:5, 13:20-22, 13:31-33; 3 Ne. 6:15; Moro. 8:27). Yet the pursuit of power through writing and administration was heralded (Omni 1:4,9; Mosiah 8:1; Alma 5:58, 9:34; Hel. 3:15; 3 Ne. 24:16, 26:6, 9) and largely limited to the white Nephites (Hel. 3:15; 3 Ne. 23:9-13). The Spirit's vindication of Nephi's murder of Laban along with Joseph Smith's struggle with the angel Moroni justified the trade of wealth and violence for access to the written word.

Caught in the margins of an emerging world capitalism where counterfeiting and treasure divining were regular features, Joseph Smith may have independently discovered the distinction between, what Karl Marx later identified as, use-value and exchange-value.<sup>44</sup> According to Marx, commodities in a capitalist economy have a two-fold character. In one respect their value is derived from their usefulness (use-value), in another value is derived socially through mutual exchangeability with other commodities (exchange-value). Marx accused political economists of confusing exchange- and use-value by speaking of value as "a property of things, riches" rather than identifying riches (use-value) as a human ascription and exchange value as the social attribute of commodities.<sup>45</sup> When social relations among humans assume the "fantastic form of a relation between things," Marx called this the fetishism of commodities. By employing the term fetishism, he conflated an economic world view with a religious world view in which "the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race."<sup>46</sup>

The narrator of the Book of Mormon decried placing faith in the use-

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43. *Ibid.*, 171, 175.

44. See Marx, 71.

45. *Ibid.*, 73, 83.

46. *Ibid.*, 72.



value of riches and encouraged placing trust in the written word of the sacred text, an exchange-value, which was promised to be socially bound in heaven. By de-legitimizing the intrinsic value of metallic treasures, the Mormon prophet erased the distinction between a counterfeit document and one actually translated from golden plates. The "Truth" of the Book of Mormon was not to be found in the existence or non-existence of a set of golden plates; rather, one placed faith in the text, a representation of Logos. This faith had power regardless of whether the plates existed. From this point of view, those who placed their faith in actual metallic records were seeking after the slippery treasures of idolatry. On the other hand, a faith based on the written text anticipated an eternal reward. Yet even faith in the written text was an act of fetishization—an immortal reification of a record-keeping God by members of a record-keeping community.

#### SALVATION AND DAMNATION

While writing served as a descriptive tool by explaining disparate social relations in the early nineteenth century, the fetishization of writing continues to shape many of the activities, perceptions, and social relations in the LDS communities of the late twentieth century. Writing appears to be essential for the salvation of the Latter-day Saints. Mormons are exhorted to read the scriptures and official publications such as the *Ensign* and *Church News*. Books written by the church's general authorities are virtually guaranteed to sell in large quantities.<sup>47</sup> Lessons in Sunday school, Primary, priesthood, Relief Society, and Family Home Evening are today drawn from centrally correlated manuals. Latter-day Saints write in their diaries, mark their attendance on rolls, and pay tithing with paper bills or checks. They are not permitted to baptize, confirm, marry, or visit the temple without first answering questions from a written document in the bishop's office.

The Mormon temple is a sacred shrine to the written word. Willing ancestors may be redeemed from a telestial or terrestrial damnation only if the appropriate documentation can be found.<sup>48</sup> Through participation, by proxy, in a number of vital ordinances, Latter-day Saints add the names of the dead to vast accumulations of genealogical records filed away in a subterranean storage facility bored out of sheer granite in

47. Mary Bradford, ed., "If It's Written by a Living General Authority, It Will Sell: A Report on Mormon Publishing," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10 (Spring 1977): 122-24.

48. The terms telestial and terrestrial refer to the lower two of three levels of the Mormon heavens. Although they are believed to be degrees of glory, they are also a form of damnation because only those who are awarded the highest degree of glory (celestial) can progress to godhood in the afterlife.

Utah's Little Cottonwood Canyon.<sup>49</sup> Visitors to the temple dream of one day becoming a god or goddess so that they, too, may have their own archive in a granite mountainside where they can spend eternity consulting the billions of pages of records their spirit children accumulate.

Writing can be liberating for Mormons. Yet some Mormons find the emphasis on writing somewhat confining. One need only serve as a ward clerk on a Superbowl Sunday, a bishop during tithing settlement, a genealogist descended from a people without records, a Sunday school teacher who cannot teach from a correlated manual, a Relief Society instructor longing for the validation of women independent of male authority, a teenager during family scripture readings, or a scholar whose writings have brought her before a disciplinary council. At these or similar points one may recognize the enslaving potential of the written word. Writing is both the source of the Latter-day Saint's salvation and damnation.

Recent excommunications and church disciplinary actions have drawn increased attention to the potentially transgressive nature of writing in the LDS community.<sup>50</sup> Scholars with credentials earned in secular institutions who speak and publish in outlets not under the direct control of church leadership may be threatening to church leaders because they disrupt the hierarchy of sites of discourse in which the right to speak and/or write authoritatively for the church is limited to general authorities.<sup>51</sup> Scholarly writings become transgressive when authors depart from

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49. Shoumatoff, 247-93; Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 268; Bloom, 120-21.

50. D. Michael Quinn, "150 Years of Truth and Consequences About Mormon History," *Sunstone* 16 (Feb. 1992): 12-14, and "Dilemmas of Feminists and Intellectuals in the Contemporary LDS Church," *Sunstone* 17 (June 1994): 67-73; Lavina Fielding Anderson, "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Spring 1993): 7-66; Richard D. Poll, "Dialogue Toward Forgiveness: A Supporting View—A Response to 'The LDS Community and Church Leadership: A Chronology,'" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Spring 1993): 67-78; Elbert Eugene Peck, "A Response to Paul Toscano's 'A Plea to the Leadership of the Church: Choose Love Not Power,'" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Spring 1993): 109-20; "Six Intellectuals Disciplined for Apostasy," *Sunstone* 15 (Nov. 1993): 65-73; "Disciplinary Actions Generate More Heat," *Sunstone* 16 (Dec. 1993): 67-69; "The Wright Excommunication Documents," *Sunstone* 17 (Sept. 1994): 65-76; "Oaks Dissembled Packer's Role in Toscano Excommunication," *Sunstone* 16 (Dec. 1993): 69; Paul Toscano, *The Sanctity of Dissent* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994); "Mormon Feminist Disciplined," *Sunstone* 18 (Apr. 1995): 80; Janice Allred, "An Open Letter to Bishop Hammond," and "Defense of Janice Allred," *Sunstone* 18 (Apr. 1995): 80-84; "Editor of Essays on Book of Mormon Excommunicated," *Sunstone* 18 (Apr. 1995): 88.

51. Richard L. Bushman, "Faithful Histories"; Paul M. Edwards, "The Irony of Mormon History"; Edwin S. Gaustad, "History and Theology: The Mormon Connection"; D. Michael Quinn, "On Being a Mormon Historian (and Its Aftermath)," all in George D. Smith, ed. *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 6, 21, 60, 95. For comments on hierarchies of sites of discourse, see Stallybrass and White, 80, 201.

the example set by church leaders, when the right of censorship is denied to their ecclesiastical superiors, when they directly challenge the authority of church leaders or canonical works to speak the "Truth."

For some Mormons, searches for objective or neutral truth in Mormon history disguise assaults on the validity of the beliefs of Latter-day Saints and on the privileged status granted to church authorities in LDS discourse, acts BYU political scientist David Bohn calls "intellectual violence against the believing community."<sup>52</sup> Eugene England, professor of English at BYU, claims that Mormonism cannot be separated from the writings of early Mormon leaders.<sup>53</sup> His colleague, Edward Hart, notes that while "any kind of writing is dangerous enough, ... to be a Mormon writer is to face double jeopardy."<sup>54</sup> Mormon writers, wrote novelist Herbert Harker, are plagued by "a confusion of loyalties between spiritual obligations and artistic yearnings."<sup>55</sup>

While writing outside controlled sites of discourse challenges the social hierarchy in the church, many writings by church leaders may also be labeled "intellectual violence." Recent attacks by church leaders were leveled against feminists, scholars, homosexuals, and advocates of abortion and population control.<sup>56</sup> Writings that non-Mormon historian Lawrence Foster has termed "sanitized, saccharine accounts, treatments which would be characterized as 'propaganda'"<sup>57</sup> (this includes faith-promoting histories and apologetic defenses of the Book of Mormon that present the text as the authentic sacred history of ancient America) also mask attacks on points of view and social hierarchies held by non-Mormons, particularly Native Americans. Mormon writing does not occur in a neutral playing field but *always* is thrust into, creates, and/or emerges from a domain of contested social relations.<sup>58</sup>

In his essay on "Dealing with Spiritual Abuse," Paul Toscano, excommunicated in 1993, questioned the making of definitions, the creation of rules, the rendering of judgments, and the maintenance of control—all

52. David Earl Bohn, "Unfounded Claims and Impossible Expectations: A Critique of New Mormon History," in George D. Smith, 228.

53. Eugene England, "The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years," *Brigham Young University Studies* 22 (Spring 1982): 131-60.

54. Edward L. Hart, "Writing: The Most Hazardous Craft," *Brigham Young University Studies* 26 (Summer 1986): 81-84.

55. Herbert Harker, "Excavating Myself," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 11 (Summer 1978): 56-62.

56. "Elder Packer Names Gays/Lesbians, Feminists, and 'so-called' Scholars Three Main Dangers," *Sunstone* 16 (Nov. 1993): 74-75; "Elder Faust Attacks Abortion, Population Control, Homosexuality," *Sunstone* 18 (Apr. 1995): 85.

57. Lawrence Foster, "New Perspectives on the Mormon Past: Reflections of a Non-Mormon Historian," in George D. Smith, 119.

58. Mignolo, 5, has argued that "the past cannot be rendered in a neutral discourse." This is an especially accurate assessment in the case of Mormons.

actions which depend on writing to be enforced.<sup>59</sup> Elsewhere, he decried "the ever-increasing tendency of church leaders to preach and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ in legalistic and controlling terms."<sup>60</sup> Yet he sought defense and protection for the victims of spiritual abuse through writing itself. Demanding greater accountability, Toscano played a major role in the formation of the Mormon Alliance, whose purpose was to "uncover, identify, define, name, chronicle, resist and even combat acts of defamation and spiritual abuse."<sup>61</sup> Lavina Fielding Anderson and D. Michael Quinn, two other excommunicants from 1993, carried this task out, documenting over a hundred cases of ecclesiastical pressure and publishing these abuses in independent journals such as *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*.<sup>62</sup>

Like Toscano, Janice Allred (another recently excommunicated Mormon) discounted ways of measuring whether standards were being met while simultaneously demanding that ecclesiastical leaders "be strictly accountable to relate the manner in which they received their revelation" and that they be subservient to the word of God as given in the scriptures and other inspired writings.<sup>63</sup>

Both perpetrators and victims of church disciplinary actions wielded the same sword—a metaphorical sword of Laban—the all-powerful pen. Presumably at stake in this battle over the word of God is the eternal salvation of disciplined Latter-day Saints, an immortality to be determined first and foremost by a document of membership, disfellowshipment, or excommunication filed away in a bureaucrat's office or a granite mountainside. These challenges to and defenses of religious authority have generally been surprisingly orthodox; both dissidents and church leaders employed writing as the primary source of religious authority.

## CONCLUSION

The Book of Mormon, complemented by other Mormon scriptures, set a standard for human interaction with God. Mormons mediate death through an ambitious genealogical program. Mormons construct a reality in which death is transmutable by a paper trail to heaven. Through writing they gain a sense of mastery over the ancient non-literate inhabitants of the New World, presenting them with a history that they neither had nor desired, while many Mormons are engaged in a process of ritualized

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59. Toscano, 114-15.

60. *Ibid.*, 172.

61. *Ibid.*, 130-31.

62. Quinn, "150 Years" and "Dilemmas"; Anderson, "The LDS Intellectual Community."

63. Janice Allred, "Freedom and Grace: Rethinking Theocracy," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28 (Summer 1995): 75-76.

genealogy that allows them to bestow salvation on European ancestors whose good fortune permitted their names to be recorded by their abominable churches and governments from whom they will now be redeemed. It was death itself, the murder of Laban which Eugene England has likened to the sacrifice of Jesus, that made writing accessible to Lehi, his descendants, and today's Mormons.<sup>64</sup>

The counter-discourses of Janice Allred, Lavina Fielding Anderson, D. Michael Quinn, and Paul Toscano are shaped by a *model for* conflict between writing and authority that originally emerged as a *model of* tensions between writing and authority in the revelations of Joseph Smith. Their struggles with church leadership represent both the enlightening and restrictive potential of writing. Writing is potentially transgressive for Mormons because the authority of the ecclesiastical institution is tied to a book—a book which is both a *model of* and a *model for* social order. In their challenges to the suppressive efforts of general authorities, Mormon intellectuals wield the same weapon of representation to combat spiritual abuse that they decry, thereby reproducing more of the same. Their depiction of abuse contributes to and validates its production through writing. They seek to counter the work of oppressive leaders by oppressively representing and confining the leaders. By defining, identifying, and cataloging abuse in the immortal written word, they seek their own liberation but also reproduce the oppression they fear. Unfortunately, I too am not free from this double-edged sword of Laban. One might legitimately ask, how else may one resist the power of the word?

Those who object to recent disciplinary actions executed against writers who dared to challenge the God of the record keepers may overlook the restrictive tone of their own writing masquerading just beneath the liberating surface of the texts. The Book of Mormon entered a contested domain in colonial relations in which the liberation it offered to Euro-American immigrants masked vindication for the genocide inflicted on the indigenous populations of the Americas. In return, this golden Bible offered a continuity with the sacred history of the Old World as an alternative to listening to Native Americans. The God of Mormonism amply demonstrated a willingness to deal violently with those who trespass into the sacred hierarchy of written texts. If, in this paper world, the vengeful retaliation against Laban and the so-called Lamanites was, in fact, justice, then so too is modern-day excommunication.

Like Laban, church leaders will undoubtedly continue accepting the silver and gold of their followers. They will not, however, relinquish control of Logos. As a primary source of power, their written distributions

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64. Eugene England, "Why Nephi Killed Laban: Reflections on the Truth of the Book of Mormon," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22 (Fall 1989): 32-51.

will continue to be strictly monitored and correlated. Through disciplinary actions intent on silencing, controlling, and/or discrediting criticism, they will rob many members of their riches. Scholars who retaliate will likely continue in their attempts to slay Laban with his own sword and then raid his treasure chest. The tragic ending to the Book of Mormon reminds us, though, that ultimately Logos failed to save the Nephites while the sword of Laban destroyed them.