

About this Commemorative Issue

Neal and Rebecca Chandler

IN A RECENT ARTICLE IN THE *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Scott McLemee fixes the onset of the abundantly energetic “field of Mormon Studies” with two debuts: the Mormon History Association was organized in 1965 and a year later “a small circle of graduate students at Stanford University” launched *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.¹ For many of us old enough to have watched it, that launch was a world-turning event, more adventurous even than Apollo. The tumult and euphoria in the early letters is palpable, contagious. Then, however, the long work of an independent journal began: the staffing and organizing and re-staffing and re-organizing, the searching and soliciting and coaxing and cajoling of submissions, and reading and reading and reading and winnowing and mailing out and calling in, the difficult inexorable weighing, the getting to “yes,” having to say “no,” the dithering/debating over “maybe,” the art work and design, the editing and proofing and galleys and proofing and bluelines and proofing and printing and packing and mailing and paying of printers and postage and pipers and sometimes—sometimes a heavy price. And all this, of course, without neglecting subscribers, nor re-subscribers, nor donors, especially donors, with deadlines to keep and standards and promises and databases. The list is very incomplete but litany enough already to employ and explain the stout army of souls—listed as fully as we are able on the inside cover—who during these 35 years have lent passion, intelligence, agility, and homely doggedness to this good work. *Dialogue* endures as a tribute first to its attentive reader-subscribers, then to the thinkers and writers and visual artists, who submit—and submit to review—but also to generous friends, and not least of all to *Dialogue*'s line-workers whose courage and spit and wire and forfeit of sleep have kept the enterprise churning.

1. Scott McLemee, “Latter-day Studies: Scholars of Mormonism Confront the History of What Some Call ‘the Next World Religion,’” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 48, no. 28 (March 22, 2002): A14.

So how did we choose from over three decades of publishing just what best to reprint at the turn of a new millennium. We asked ourselves, our various boards, many friends of *Dialogue*, and our exceptional guest editor Gary Bergera. The short list would easily have yielded 800 pages and perhaps as many letters of protest. Every long time reader will question choices and most certainly object to omissions. You yourself would have made other selections. We know this, but you are not holding a volume of greatest hits even though Dick Poll's "What the Church Means to People Like Me," Lester Bush's "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine," and Duane Jeffrey's "Seers, Savants and Evolution" appeared on nearly every list we received. You will find here, nonetheless, a collection—sorely limited by space—of articles and essays that seem to the editors to have had watershed significance. By that we mean writing in whose wake our thinking about value or doctrine or factual circumstance has been substantially affected, even changed. Not surprisingly, we discovered that most such writing falls into areas of controversy. *Dialogue*, as dramatists understand, is only then dialogue, is only significant and engaging when parties differ, when they are not—as in some familiar settings—merely alternating voices, reading successive passages from a correlated and monological script. It is conflict that drives plot and moves discussion forward. This is a dramatic and rhetorical truism, but most of the articles chosen for this issue are historical in focus, and there is an historical circumstance at work here as well.

"We tend to assume," writes religious historian Karen Armstrong, "that people of the past were (more or less) like us, but in fact their spiritual lives were rather different. In particular, they evolved two ways of thinking, seeking, and acquiring knowledge, which scholars have called *mythos* and *logos*. Both were essential; they were regarded as complementary ways of arriving at truth, and each had its special area of competence."² *Mythos*, she explains, entailed the stories, histories, and images that address deep emotional and psychological needs. They give meaning even and, in fact, precisely to difficult lives. They help meaningfully to address deep fears and demons arising from within. The stories of Jonah and Noah and Ruth, the parted Red Sea, the boat-building Brother of Jared, even the story of the stone rolled away from the tomb are nowhere told as in contemporary histories to establish the time-and-place, cause-and-effect, fact-supported historicity of events, but rather to tell us something about the meaning of lives, their ultimate promise and obligation, the way they ought from an eternal perspective to be lived.

2. Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000), xv.

Mythos, however, is not meant as a practical guide to action or behavior in the mundane world. This was the domain of “logos” or reason, and, in pre-modern times, Armstrong says, it was held that to confuse one realm with the other was dangerous.³ Even believers of more devout eras did not send faithful adolescent boys with only a stone and a sling to face formidable military opponents. The late medieval children’s crusade was perhaps an exception, but it was also an horrific mistake. Apocalyptic accounts of the end of the world and of judgement sober us, but also reassure us that someone supremely powerful and just is finally in charge and “will bring every work into judgement, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Eccl. 12:14). However, attempts, both biblical and recent, to reframe those accounts as predictions have a long and absolute record of failure and consequences both comical and disastrous.

In the practical world *logos* or reason reigns supreme, so much so since the Enlightenment and the astounding successes of science and technology that virtually every enterprise in human knowledge has come to define itself as an extension of reason. *Mythos* as method has been shouldered aside and even difficult matters of emotion and interior psychological need have been re-assigned to psychotherapy, the rational science of the irrational. Yet, in most of the world, *mythos* stubbornly persists, sometimes obliquely as a turn to astrology or Tarot or the metaphysics of crystals, but also surely in the remarkable growth and energy of conservative religion—even though such religion is everywhere embattled, even, as it turns out, by itself. This is the crux and a particular contribution of Armstrong’s analysis. For it turns out that the most conservative churches, the ones we call “Fundamentalist” are, in fact, radically modern in their acceptance of reason over myth. It is they, more than almost anyone else, who insist that the literal historicity of scriptural accounts is the touchstone of their truthfulness.⁴ If the Bible says six days or (by extrapolation) six thousand years, then that’s exactly what it means. Jonah rode in that whale, Noah and animal legions in the ark. Job lost ten good children to an ugly bet but got ten even better ones back. Lazarus rose. Jared’s brother lit up the dark with stones. And Joseph Smith received golden plates from an angel. We call this scriptural literalism. It is, insists Armstrong, a modern, rationalist invention.

This analysis seems to us precisely to describe a central rift which traverses LDS intellectual culture and marches starkly through the pages of *Dialogue*. In his famous essay, Richard Poll, names this divide and cer-

3. *Ibid.*, xvii.

4. *Ibid.*, 366.

tain behaviors it occasions, but other articles in this volume help us perhaps to see even more precisely its nature. Again and again the rational question of factual historicity is central. What are the historical facts of Joseph Smith's first vision, of his translation of the Book of Abraham, of the origins of the longstanding church policy to deny priesthood to Black men. What was historical fact and what is "myth" about the 1844 transfiguration of Brigham Young, and then of course (and yet again), what is the factual history of human origins, given the biblical story on the one hand and mountains of scientific evidence on the other. These are relentlessly rational questions, and, as Armstrong predicts, just like the secular ones, religious answers have been relentlessly rational: Explaining first vision inconsistencies, for instance, as matters of interpretation, not reinvention. Correcting simplistic definitions of "source" and of "translation." There were attempts before the point became moot to establish both the scriptural and the genetic chains of cause and effect that explained the proscription of priesthood to Blacks. Right now in some parts of the United States there is a movement afoot to establish "Intelligent Design" in highschool curricula as a scientifically viable alternative to evolution. Not all such defenses have appeared in the pages of *Dialogue*. It is part of the difficulty of discussion that participants often choose or are forced to choose alternative, auditioned forums. But whatever the intellectual venue, the point here is the ascendancy of *logos* on all sides in the discussion.

When I first read the introduction to Karen Armstrong's *The Battle for God*, I was at a family gathering and half listening to a serious argument between family members—one, a professor, invoking testimony and insisting on the power of the gospel and church activity to change our lives while the other, a business professional, reported relentlessly from his research the betrayals of historical fact upon which certain truth claims of Mormonism depend. The worlds of *mythos* and *logos* on the page were coming to me live and in predictable collision from across the room. Nor was it lost on me that both perspectives lie concurrently potential in any single individual, not least of all because I had some years earlier heard almost the same argument between precisely the same litigants, except that each had then taken the other's currently so adamant position. Among the ancient Greeks, at least, irony was a serious religious principle, and though neither disagreement was pleasant, I see them now as important, even necessary. There are in our personal histories and in the pages of *Dialogue* moments when we cross—may be forced to cross—to the other perspective. When Margaret Wheatley and Nadine Hansen write about women and the priesthood, they write not just about origins (in Wheatley's case, not at all), but about consequences and what policies and practices *mean* in people's lives. When my wife and I first encountered "Solus" many years ago, we found ourselves asking not about

scriptural rules, nor about scientific evidence concerning sexual orientation, but about what it must mean to have been defined as evil by your honored religion, and not for anything you'd ever done, but for who you were. It was a transforming, epiphanal encounter in the space of a few pages.

We cannot go back to pre-modern times. We will, all of us, labor rationally in an age of reason. But neither can we obviate, not faithfully and certainly not dismissively, the human need for mythic kinds of knowledge. There are no investments nor websites nor scientific methodologies to make us meaningful or wise or decent. These needs, served by religion, will not go away or be denied, even though the rigors of professional history present stark rational challenges to a religion still so uncomfortably proximate to its "colorful" and amply documented past. "This," observes McLemee, "makes Mormon studies an exceptionally passionate field, in which faith wrestles with scholarship, sometimes as violently as Jacob did with the angel."⁵

The metaphor is apt. In the scripture, Jacob, migrating with his family and flocks, is approaching his brother Essau, whom, even after many years away, he has good reason to fear. There is a great deal at stake. The angel appears, as the text seems to suggest, the night before their encounter in one of those anxious dreams that seem to go on forever. It's a harrowing contest, and Jacob is badly wounded, but even though his talent has always been for subterfuge and flight, he does not shrink from this conflict. He wrestles the "angel" and will not quit—there is no talk of victory—until his opponent grants him an interesting prize: a blessing. In the morning Jacob carefully arranges his family and resources to finesse the confrontation with his powerful brother, only to discover that his tactical preparations are superfluous. Esau has long since resolved to forgive and is overjoyed just to embrace him. They are in an altogether new place and era (the one named in Jacob's blessing), Israel. Still, we must not think that difficulties and confrontations are over for the newly installed patriarch. In the very next chapter of Genesis, the terrible story of Dinah and Schechem, Jacob's own carefully brought up children bring him into terrible conflict with his neighbors (and—one would like to hope—with his own conscience). "Ye have troubled me," he wails, "to make me to stink among the inhabitants of the land. . . they shall gather themselves together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed." (Gen. 34:30). Israel has had an embarrassing start. His history, the facts as we receive them, make for awkward, uncomfortable reading. And yet we think this story and also the closely preceding brawl with the angel are

⁵ "Latter-day Studies," A14.

enormously, *mythically* instructive about the inevitability of conflict and the rewards of facing our demons and wrestling them despite wounds and persisting *until they yield us a blessing*. It's the blessing of dialogue.

We expect that the journal will continue to engage and exercise readers, to supply reassurances, but also to rock even anchored boats, and sometimes to provide breakthrough moments when we are led over—by some terrible grace—into another's perspective. If you relish such moments as much as you fear them, then, whether seasoned or brand new to these pages, you are an anchor subscriber to *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and we greet you and welcome you, once again, home.