

The Book of Mormon and Religious Epistemology¹

Terryl L. Givens

IN HIS IMPORTANT STUDY OF *LANGUAGE, BELIEF, AND EXPERIENCE*, the ethnographer Rodney Needham tells of a dream which disturbed his sleep one night. He found himself among a people he had once studied, the Penan of Borneo, struggling to converse with them in their native tongue. He was distressed to realize he could not translate one particular phrase: "I believe in God." Needham uses this experience to launch an investigation into whether belief can be considered a universal human experience. Surveying the concept across cultures, he quickly discovers two things: 1) There is a "bewildering variety of sense attaching to words in foreign languages which are indifferently translated by the English 'believe'"; 2) "There are apparently languages in which. . .there is no verbal concept at all which can convey exactly what may be understood by the English word 'believe.'"² Or, as Evan-Pritchard generalized the problem in his famous study of the Nuer: "If I speak of 'spear' or 'cow' everybody will have pretty much the same idea of what I speak of, but this is not so when I speak of 'Spirit,' 'soul,' 'sin,' and so forth."³

¹Major portions of this essay have appeared in Terryl L. Givens, "The Book of Mormon and Dialogic Revelation," *The Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001), and in Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2002). Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.

²Rodney Needham, *Language, Belief, and Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 37.

³Evan-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), vi. Cited in *ibid.*, 19.

In the comparative study of religions, this incommensurability is a perennial obstacle to accurate understanding. It is only in the context of a group's larger cosmology that religious terms acquire their precise meaning. In the case of cultures with scripture, the student of religion is helped a great deal by becoming conversant with a group's religious worldview, or as I wish to emphasize more particularly, with its religious epistemology.

In this paper, I want to make some tentative observations about the way in which the Book of Mormon has contributed to the fashioning of a particular religious vocabulary, or to be more specific, the disclosure of a particular religious epistemology. I am not arguing that this epistemology necessarily signaled a radical break from Protestantism, or that it conditions a religious vocabulary wholly lacking in Protestant equivalents. Rather, I hope to suggest that the role of the Book of Mormon in framing the concept of prayer and revelation in particular is connected to subtle shades of differences and distinctions which are worth examining.⁴

MODELS OF REVELATION

Avery Dulles, in his important survey of models of revelation, notes five versions, three of which have been significant in Christian history. In *revelation as doctrine*, revelation is "generally identified with the Bible, [which is] viewed as a collection of inspired and inerrant teachings." According to the view of *revelation as history*, the Bible bears witness to the primary revelation, wherein "God reveals himself. . . in his great deeds." Finally, by *revelation as inner experience*, the theologian means a "privileged interior experience of grace or communion with God," such as the mystics have known.⁵

The first two models have by and large been normative for Christians. Although the third model sounds closest to the Mormon conception of revelation, Protestant and Catholic thinkers alike have so encumbered

⁴Crucial differences have certainly been alleged in regard to Mormon theological terms, although—in light of Evan-Pritchard's observation—with less injury than was perhaps intended. Writes one critic, "More than a few well meaning Christians have been totally misled because of the lack of being aware of these [Mormon terminological] differences!" A Christian may "think he is in agreement with a Mormon," the same writer warns, when "in reality, they are worlds apart on what is meant by what is said" (Bob Witte, *Where Does it Say That?* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Gospel Truths, n.d.], 13-1).

⁵Avery Dulles, S. J., *Models of Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 27-28. Avery's two less historically significant models are *revelation as dialectical presence*, as developed by a group of post-WWI theologians, emphasizing the utter transcendence of God and the word of God, which "simultaneously reveals and conceals the divine presence"; and *revelation as new awareness*, which more recent theologians have postulated as "an expansion of consciousness or shift of perspective when people join in the movements of secular history."

it with qualifications and limitations that it seldom comes close to the type of revelatory experience depicted in the Book of Mormon, or what I call "dialogic revelation." Emerson may not be entirely representative of Protestantism when he pointedly calls prayer "the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul," and his formula causes one nineteenth-century preacher to object that "prayer. . . is not 'soliloquy,' but dialogue." Yet that same preacher goes on to define prayerful "dialogue" as anything but two-way communication:

Now, in order to have a real energy of spiritual life, we must have actual intercourse with God himself. . . . And to commune with him, we must have something to say to him. . . . Therefore, God, in order that men may come into real communion with him and so receive real vital energy—faith, love, peace, joy—has ordered it so that we may speak to him of our real wants.⁶

Strange "intercourse" this, where only man must have something to say, and in consequence of which he receives not an answer, but "vital energy" (which may, in any case, be more a product of the act of petition itself than of any "response").

From a philosophical perspective, the premise that God is transcendent and that he has no "phenomenal existence" means the very characterization of any revelation as "interior experience" or "communion," to use Dulles's terms, or "dialogue," to use James Clarke's, is problematic. As Emmanuel Levinas asks, "How can we make sense of the 'exteriority' of the truths and signs of the Revelation which strike the human faculty known as reason? It is a faculty which, despite its 'interiority,' is equal to whatever the world confronts us with. But how can these truths and signs strike our reason if they are not even of this world?"⁷ Similarly, particularized manifestations or communications are either redundant or illogical in a universe which is co-extensive with God Himself. Therefore, even within this model, as George Tyrrell writes, "there can be no revealed statements or doctrines." Similarly, Auguste Sabatier insists that "the object of the revelation of God can only be God," and Ernest William Hocking holds that even the mystic, "as he is a mystic pure and simple knows nothing else than God."⁸

⁶James Freeman Clarke, *The Christian Doctrine of Prayer* (1854; reprint, Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1890), 166, xi.

⁷In Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: 1995), 8-9.

⁸G. Tyrrell, *Through Scylla and Charybdis* (London: Longmans, Green, 1907), 326-27; A. Sabatier, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion Based on Psychology and History* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1897), 35; W. E. Hocking, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 448. All cited in Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 72-73.

Eventually, the game is up when Dulles says that for the theologians of this third model, "the experience of God. . . may be called grace, and grace, insofar as it brings about a new awareness of the divine, is revelation."⁹ In other words, this model seems little more than recognition of the obvious fact that the reality of God and his great acts, however objective and universally valid (as the first two models emphasize), must be intersubjectively experienced to be operative in human life. However, when Tyrrell calls this experience "a passive impression," we seem to have in this model a distinction from the others without a clear difference.¹⁰

The equivocal and limiting definitions of "revelation as inner experience" are undoubtedly tied to the plethora of theological dragons lurking in the domain of experiential religion. Even William Abraham, while critiquing theological hostility to divine speaking, and pleading for greater "openness to divine intervention in the world," acknowledges personal misgivings about the ways fundamentalists "have used the emphasis on propositional revelation to underscore an account of inspiration that is both confused and dangerous."¹¹

However, the threat and historical experience of heresy, schism, and sectarianism are not the only reasons for preferring historical or textual bases of revelation to subjective ones. Hostility to a model of experiential revelation has been grounded in a variety of other reasons, including fear of irrationalism,¹² the perceived sufficiency of the

⁹Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 70.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 73. Dulles himself seems to agree, claiming weakly that since the two prior models are grounded in historically circumscribed events, this model, "in its acceptance of continuing revelation. . . contrasts with the two preceding models." Even for fundamentalists, this "propositional" model of revelation can be simply another name for Dulles's first model, revelation as doctrine. Clark Pinnock, for instance, defines propositional revelation as "the conceptual truth extractable from Holy Scripture" (*A Defense of Biblical Infallibility* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1967], 4, n.15, in William J. Abraham, *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* [New York: Oxford, 1982], 22).

¹¹Abraham, *Divine Revelation*, 189, 10.

¹²Baillie, for instance, traces the emphasis on objectivist definitions of revelation to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when Kant, Hegel, Ritschl, and other philosopher-theologians of the post-Enlightenment saw little role for divine communication, wishing instead to see theology develop as the elaboration of a religious sensibility (John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1956], 3-15). To partisans of natural religion at that time, as with liberal theology today, any concession to the supernatural or the supersubjective was playing into the hands of Christianity's enemies. Compare this development with Kaufmann Kohler's account of revelation in Judaism, where "this supernatural element disappears gradually and passes over into sober, self-conscious thought, in which the writer no longer thinks of God as the Ego speaking through him" (*Jewish Theology* [New York: Macmillan, 1918], 39). Not surprisingly, Mormon scholars trace the disparagement of subjective revelation much farther back, to the first two Christian centuries, when "the primary targets of these heresy-hunters were the

canon,¹³ the concern to preserve the integrity of individual agency,¹⁴ and, perhaps most emphatically, theological resistance to anything tending toward anthropomorphism.¹⁵ Abraham notes that in the midst of such gradual, deliberate dilution of the concept of divine speaking, (which would entail both intersubjectivity and communicated content), traces of a more literal definition stubbornly persist. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, for example, defines revelation as “the communication of some truth by God to a rational creature through means which are beyond the ordinary course of nature.” Likewise, the Oxford English

so-called Gnostics, who claimed to receive their doctrine through revelation from heaven rather than by reasoning through the scriptures” (C. Wilfred Griggs, “Rediscovering Ancient Christianity,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 4 [1999]: 73-90). Griggs notes that one of the earliest Christian controversies, the “Valentinian Crisis,” was precipitated when that popular Alexandrian “claimed to have received his doctrine through revelatory experience” (74).

¹³In Charles Thompson’s 1841 defense of the Book of Mormon, five of the six objections he listed as directed at the new revelation were really variations on the same theme: “The Bible is full and complete” (Charles B. Thompson, *Evidences in Proof of the Book of Mormon Being a Divinely Inspired Record* [Batavia, N.Y.: D.D. Waite, 1841], 149-67).

¹⁴In the opinion of poet and sometimes theologian Samuel Coleridge, explicit directives from above would compromise individual agency. In support of his view, he cites Romans 8:26 (“Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered”): “‘The Spirit aid[s] our infirmities;’ that is, *act[s] on the Will* by a predisposing influence *from without*, as it were, though in a spiritual manner, and without suspending or destroying its freedom. . . . Nor is there any danger of Fanaticism or Enthusiasm as the consequence of such a belief, if only the attention be carefully and earnestly drawn to the concluding words of the sentence (Romans viii. v. 26); if only the due force and *full import* be given to the term *unutterable* or *incommunicable*, in St. Paul’s use of it. In this, the strictest and most proper use of the term, it signifies, that the subject, of which it is predicated, is something which I *cannot*, which from the nature of the thing it is impossible that I should, communicate to any human mind (even of a person under the same conditions with myself) so as to make it *in itself* the object of his direct and immediate consciousness. It cannot be the object of *my own* direct and immediate Consciousness; but must be *inferred*” (“Aids to Reflection,” in John Beer, ed., *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993], 9:78-79). So here we have again the retreat into linguistic inadequacy, except that for Coleridge, it is not the nature of God alone which is beyond human expressing, but any knowledge *revealed by God*.

¹⁵As Abraham reasons, “When the theist speaks of divine revelation the activity of human revealing serves as the model for conceiving that revelation.” But here “we sense immediately a certain awkwardness” (Abraham, *Divine Revelation*, 11). That awkwardness is not without its theological solutions. As Wolterstorff argues, “Since God has no vocal cords with which to utter words, and no hands with which to write them down, God cannot literally speak, cannot literally be a participant in a linguistic communication. Accordingly, attributions of speech to God, if not judged bizarrely false, must be taken as metaphorical” (Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 10). Also, as Sandra M. Schneider writes, outside of an anthropomorphic model it is “evident” that “divine discourse cannot be taken literally. . . . Language, in other words, is a human phenomenon rooted in our corporeality as well as in our discursive mode of intellection and as such cannot be literally predicated of pure spirit” (*The Revelatory Text* [San Francisco: Harper, 1991], 27-29).

Dictionary calls it “the disclosure or communication of knowledge to man by a divine or supernatural agency.” However, the movement away from this “propositional” theory of revelation, or what Abraham calls theology’s “vehement reaction” against it, has been pronounced since the nineteenth century,¹⁶ so much so, that he seriously questions the very viability of the concept of revelation at the present time:

To claim that God reveals Himself to man but to reject the [belief that] he reveals Himself by speaking to man is to so whittle away the analogy on which the concept of divine revelation is built that it must be seriously asked whether the concept of divine revelation has enough content to license its continued use. Revelation in the fully personal sense characteristic of personal agents has been abandoned.¹⁷

Retreating into metaphor, confusing “monologue” for “dialogue,” reading heavenly silence or quotidian event as “answer”—all these strategies cannot belie the fact, as Rodney Stark reminds us in his quest for more terminological rigor, that “a revelation is not an insight or an inspiration. A revelation is a communication. . . . A revelation presupposes a divine being capable of wishes and intentions.”¹⁸ Obviously, it would be reductive and inaccurate to characterize all prayer in the Christian tradition as a kind of vague projection into the void, operating with such blithe openness to the outcome that it begs the very question of prayer’s efficacy. The kind of prayer which is an asking, rather than an asking for, and which anticipates a personal response, a discernible moment of dialogue or communicated content, would be a distinctive kind of prayer, one falling outside the models of revelation we have seen, relegating as they do God’s operations to historical events, canonized texts, or the infusion of “vital energy.” The response envisioned by this latter type of prayer—the experience of “revelation” following from a literal conception of divine discourse—is one that William James, for example, characterizes as distinctive, and associates with Catholic Saints, George Fox, the Old Testament prophets, and Joseph Smith. Here he quotes W. Sanday: “There is something sharp and sudden about it. He can lay his finger so to speak, on the moment when it came.”¹⁹ However, in the case of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, even James’s distinction is insufficient. Far beyond a forceful spiritual intimation, one finds in the Book

¹⁶Abraham, *Divine Revelation*, 8-9.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁸Rodney Stark, “A Theory of Revelations,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 2 (1999): 289.

¹⁹William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 373.

of Mormon that prayer frequently and dramatically evokes an answer impossible to mistake as anything other than an individualized, dialogic response to a highly particularized question.

THE BOOK OF MORMON AND DIALOGIC REVELATION

Regarding Augustine's belief that God spoke through the mouth of a child, Nicholas Wolterstorff has written: "What would Judaism, Christianity, and Islam look like if no one spoke of God commanding, no one, of God promising, no one, of God telling?"²⁰ Like the three major religions mentioned by Wolterstorff, Mormonism comes with its unique scriptural canon. One of the functions of a sacred text is to ground or establish a coherent cosmology. By so doing, it adumbrates the parameters of religious experience, at the same time providing for the meaningful interpretation of that religious experience.²¹ Accordingly, the extent and shape and meaning of "revelation," as operative in the Book of Mormon, like "spirit" or "god" in Nuer religion, may provide the best basis for understanding the extent, shape, and meaning of such a term as "revelation." Thus, when in the Book of Mormon God commands, promises, tells, speaks, exhorts, chastises, and directs in myriad circumstances and settings, it may be understood in ways particular to Mormonism.

Nowhere is the concentration of heavenly utterances more intense than in the First Book of Nephi. In the first fifty pages alone, we read of eight visions, various angelic visitations, several occasions on which Nephi is "visited" by the Lord, "constrained by the Spirit," "led by the Spirit," "commanded" by the Lord, and so forth. More to the point, Nephi and his father also describe several occasions which cannot be interpreted as mere dreams, spiritual promptings, or heaven-sent impressions. In response to his pleadings on behalf of his wicked brothers, Nephi records, "The Lord spake unto me, saying, . . ." Subsequently, he records that "the Lord spake unto" his father, telling him to procure wives for the journey to the Promised Land. Later, the "voice of the Lord

²⁰Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 8.

²¹As Alan Grossman has written: "Scripture is privileged text. The nature of the textual privilege of scripture derives from the fact that the source of its language is identical with the source of reality. . . . Men conserve Scripture, first, as the final map of all reality and, then, as the possibility of any mapping of reality which time and the accidents of historicity—the general rage against meaning—threaten to snatch from the hand" ("Summa Lyrica: A Primer of the Commonplaces in Speculative Poetics," in Alan Grossman and Mark Halliday, *The Sighted Singer: Two Works on Poetry for Readers and Writers* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992], 245). Similarly, Ian Barbour describes the function of religious language as providing models that "are used in the interpretation of experience" (*Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study In Science And Religion* [New York: Harper and Row, 1971], 57).

came unto my father" and "chastened" him for his murmuring, then "the voice of the Lord came and did speak many words" to the rebellious Laman. Preparatory to building a ship for their journey, "the voice of the Lord came unto" Nephi, the "Lord spake" unto him about the ship, "showed" him how to construct it, and "told him" where to find ore. When the time came to depart, "the voice of the Lord came unto my father, that we should arise and go down into the ship" (1 Nephi 2:19; 7:1; 16:25; 16:39; 17:7-10; 18:5).

In fact, we read Nephi's recount of how "the voice of the Lord came" to him, to his father, to Laman and Lemuel, so often that it becomes a refrain almost as pervasive as the numbingly common "and it came to pass."²² No shadowy spiritual intimations these, no merely intuited guidance or inspiration, but direct divine discourse, which frequently rises to the level of genuine dialogic exchange. For example, upon returning to Jerusalem to obtain the plates of brass, Nephi encounters the record keeper Laban in a drunken stupor. He is then "constrained by the Spirit" to slay Laban. As he recounts, "I said in my heart: Never at any time have I shed the blood of man. And I shrunk and would that I might not slay him." The dialogue develops when "the Spirit said unto me again: Behold the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands." Nephi continues to hesitate, so the Spirit persists, articulating an entire rationale behind the original directive: "And it came to pass that the Spirit said unto me again: Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands; Behold 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 and perish in unbelief" (1 Nephi 4:10-13).

A similar example of conversational revelation occurs during the conversion of Enos, Nephi's nephew. Hungering for "eternal life and the joy of the saints," Enos spends a night and a day in prayer, after which "there came a voice unto me, saying: Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be blessed." Marveling at the miracle of forgiveness, Enos asks, "Lord, how is it done? And he said unto me: Because of thy faith in Christ, whom thou hast never before heard nor seen. And many years pass away before he shall manifest himself in the flesh; wherefore, go to, thy faith hath made thee whole." But Enos does not "go to": "When I had heard these words," he writes, thus revealing the exchange's linguistic rather than impressionistic nature, he turns his thoughts to his brethren the Nephites, praying fervently on their behalf. Soon, "the voice of the Lord came into my mind again," promising them conditional blessings. Once more, after he "had heard these words," he struggles in spirit for

²²This precise expression occurs more than two dozen times. Variations of it, including the voice of the spirit or of angels, appear dozens more.

his enemies the Lamanites. Once more, the Lord speaks his assurances to him. Yet a final time, Enos prays for the preservation of the records of which he is now guardian. The exchange ends when the Lord not only speaks to, but covenants with Enos to do according to his desire. "And I, Enos, knew it would be according to the covenant which he had made; wherefore my soul did rest" (Enos 1:3-17).

THE GIFT OF GOD UNTO ALL

At first glance, such experiences recall the pattern of Old Testament prophets, and, as we saw, William James for one likened Joseph Smith himself to such ancient patriarchs. Indeed, it is true that "the Lord spake" to Moses dozens of times, engaged in a protracted negotiation with Abraham over the fate of Sodom, and obviously revealed his mind and will to a host of major and minor prophets. To some extent, one could consider that Joseph's personal ministry, as well as the Book of Mormon record, reenacts an Old Testament paradigm. Yet on closer inspection, the Book of Mormon model of revelation diverges in at least one crucial way: In the Bible, outside of prophets acting in the role of national leadership, personal revelation is almost unknown.²³ Prophets and prophecy are not just linguistically but textually synonymous. To state the matter as principle: "Prophecy was preeminently the privilege of the prophets,"²⁴ and the concern of these prophets was with the fate of kings and nations and tribes, with the workings and purposes of God in history, with the spiritual destinies of covenant peoples and fledgling churches. Even more grandly, as the great Abraham Heschel writes, "Prophecy. . . may be described as exegesis of existence from a divine perspective."²⁵ John Baillie agrees that revelation is confined to what "we need to know about our ultimate concern."²⁶ The Book of Mormon here becomes a study in contrast. Through chiasmic form, thematic structure, numerous textual examples, and a final, concluding instance of readerly invitation, the scripture hammers home the insistent message that revelation is the province of everyman. As a consequence, in the world of the Book of Mormon, concepts like revelation, prayer, inspiration, mystery, will find powerful and substantive redefinition. This may well be the Book of Mormon's most significant and revolutionary (as well as controversial) contribution to religious thinking. The particularity and specificity, the vividness, the concreteness, and the accessibility of revelatory

²³Rebekah is one notable exception. Bewildered by the twins struggling in her womb, "she went to enquire of the LORD. And the LORD said unto her. . ." (Gen. 25:23).

²⁴"Prophecy," in F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1336.

²⁵Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), xviii.

²⁶Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation*, 148.

experience—these realities both underlie and overshadow the narrated history and doctrine which constitute the record. The “knowability” of all truth, the openness of mystery, the reality of personal revelation, find vivid illustration within the record, and invite reenactment outside it.

Nephi, as chronicler of the record bearing his name, postpones until chapter 10 (chapter 3 in the 1830 edition) an account of his own “proceedings and reign and ministry,” having spent the previous sections emphasizing those of his father, Lehi. However, this is more than a gesture of filial respect, because now when Nephi records his own spiritual epiphany, it is within a context which gives the principle of revelation its first radically new contours in the Book of Mormon. Following a number of briefly narrated revelations and dreams, Lehi receives an expansive vision of the “Tree of Life,” which he relates to his family. After hearing his father’s account, Nephi writes that he “was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him” (1 Nephi 10:17).

Believing that “the Lord was able to make [those things] known unto [him],” after much pondering in his heart, Nephi is “caught away in the Spirit of the Lord,” to a place where he immediately engages that Spirit in conversation. When Nephi expresses his desire “to behold the things which [his] father saw,” the Spirit responds, “Believest thou that thy father saw the tree of which he hath spoken?” At this critical juncture, two points are highly important: First, Lehi, not Nephi, is still functioning as the unquestioned prophetic figure in the story. Nephi has even gone out of his way to acknowledge the spiritual preeminence of his father, by pointedly asking him for guidance even in the midst of his father’s recent murmurings.²⁷ In the divine economy of the Old Testament, Nephi’s inquiry of the Spirit would thus seem to be faithless at worst, and redundant at best. The spirit’s inquiry, worded as it is, might even have been construed as implicit criticism. Yet Nephi answers unhesitatingly, “Yea, thou knowest I believe all the words of my father.”

Second, as John Welch has pointed out, this query occurs at the moment of the book’s most extreme narrative tension, as the culmination of an expansive chiasmic structure that organizes all of 1 Nephi.²⁸ Framed by symmetrical prophetic modes, quest elements, characters, and motifs, Nephi’s interview is the fulcrum on which the entire complexly orga-

²⁷Afflicted by hunger and the loss of weapons while in the Old World wilderness, Lehi “did murmur against the Lord.” Nephi takes the initiative to fashion new arms, and asks his father, “Whither shall I go to obtain food?” after which Lehi humbles himself and successfully inquires of the Lord (1 Nephi 16).

²⁸Welch details the chiasmic elements in his “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981; Provo, Utah: Research Press, 1999), 199-200.

nized account of Nephi balances. The reply of the angel to Nephi's answer is therefore fraught with special significance, and that answer comes as heavenly exultation: "Hosanna to the Lord, the most high God; for he is God over all the earth, yea, even above all. And blessed art thou, Nephi, because thou believest in the Son of the most high God; wherefore, thou shalt behold the things which thou hast desired" (1 Nephi 11:1-6).

Nephi is commended, not reproved, for seeking access to the mysteries of heaven for personal rather than public edification. To forestall any misperception that his prerogative is related to some special spiritual status or to his eventual inheritance of the prophetic role, his brothers are explicitly associated with such a misguided perspective and harshly condemned as a result. Confused by Lehi's account of his vision, Laman and Lemuel complain to Nephi that "we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken" (1 Nephi 15:7). The exchange that follows anticipates and frames, together with the closing chapters of Moroni, the entire 1000-year history of righteousness and apostasy constituting the body of the Book of Mormon record. The warning these verses carry will have been grimly fulfilled by the end of the book, and will be tragically echoed by the last guardian of the records, while looking hopefully to a different audience.

And I said unto them: Have ye inquired of the Lord?

And they said unto me: We have not; for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us ["because we are not prophets," in other words].

Behold, I said unto them: How is it that ye do not keep the commandments of the Lord? How is it that ye will perish, because of the hardness of your hearts?

Do ye not remember the things which the Lord hath said?—If ye will not harden your hearts, and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made known unto you (1 Nephi 15:8-11).

The brothers do not heed the message, and as a result, they and their posterity are spiritually blighted. Nephi's belief in revelatory experience outside of official channels, and his brothers' disbelief in the same principle, seem clearly calculated to establish the pivotal importance of the principle that divides them.

The opening verse of the Book of Mormon actually portends just such a theme, when Nephi introduces himself as "having. . . had a great knowledge of the goodness and mysteries of God." New Testament uses of the word "mystery" (Μυστήριον) are quite unlike this epistemology. Occurring some 24 times, the word almost always refers to something

hidden from the world, revealed through a historical process connected to the providence of God. Romans 16:25-26 is typical: "Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith."²⁹

As Baillie writes,

In the Bible the word is always used in its proper and exalted sense. Not only is revelation always "the revelation of a mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed," but the mystery thus disclosed is nothing less than God's own will and purpose.³⁰

For Nephi, as for others in the Book of Mormon, the cognates of "mystery" (which appear in numbers comparable to New Testament occurrences) appear always in the context of a valuable truth revealed through the spirit to the seeking individual. They are supposed to be studied and apprehended by the individual. As Mosiah teaches, "Were it not for these things, which have been kept and preserved by the hand of God, that we might read and understand of his mysteries. . .we should have been like unto our brethren, the Lamanites, who know nothing concerning these things, or even do not believe them when they are taught them" (Mosiah 1:5).³¹ Later, he exhorts them to "open your ears that ye may hear, . . .and your minds that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view (Mosiah 2:9). Similarly, Alma promises "he that repenteth and exerciseth faith, . . .unto such it is given to know the mysteries of God (Alma 26:22).

Since the Book of Mormon is compiled largely by Nephite prophets, we get few portraits of religious life at the individual level. However, in addition to Nephi, we do have instances wherein other individuals (acting outside any prophetic role) are privy to revelations and the mysteries of God. For example, Mosiah fears for his sons' lives when they plan to preach in hostile territory. He "inquired of the Lord if he should let his sons go up among the Lamanites to preach the word. And the Lord said unto Mosiah: Let them go up" (Mosiah 28:6-7). Similarly, the missionary Ammon watches helplessly as thousands of his converts, now pacifists, suffer death rather than retaliate or defend themselves. He proposes a migration to the Nephite lands, but they are reluctant: "And Ammon

²⁹While the term usually refers to the gospel in general, or its new inclusivity, it can also refer to particular truths of that gospel, as it does for Paul: "Behold, I shew you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51).

³⁰Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation*, 28.

³¹See also Alma 10:5, "I have seen much of his mysteries and his marvelous power."

said: I will go and inquire of the Lord, and if he say unto us, go down unto our brethren, will ye go?" They give their consent. "And it came to pass that Ammon went and inquired of the Lord, and he said unto him: Get this people out of this land" (Alma 27:7, 11-12).³²

Who, then, has rightful access to revelations, epiphanies, visions and utterances? To the extent that the spirit of "prophecy" and the spirit of "revelation" are the same (the Book of Mormon uses the expressions in tandem and almost interchangeably), the Book of Mormon powerfully refutes the claim that "prophecy is preeminently the privilege of the prophets." Joseph Smith learned this lesson fully: "The Holy Ghost is a revelator," he taught in the years after the translation, holding that it is impossible to have the gift of the Holy Ghost and not enjoy the spirit of prophesy.³³ Consignment of revelatory prerogatives to prophets, priests, or popes alone, the implication seems to be, is but an invitation to priestcraft.

If the Book of Mormon was a template for early church organization because it pronounced doctrine on such matters as baptism and sacramental prayers, how much more its significance as a model for the how, who, and what of revelation. In laying out the doctrine of personal revelation, the Doctrine and Covenants merely elaborates what was implicit throughout the Book of Mormon: "Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart. Now, behold, this is the spirit of revelation; behold, this is the spirit by which Moses brought the children of Israel through the Red Sea on dry ground" (D&C 8:2-3). For Mormons, as for Catholics, Christ's words to Peter specified the conditions of the church's very foundation. The rock on which the church was—and is—built up, is held by both religions to be the rock of personal revelation, the process whereby truth is "revealed" not by "flesh and blood. . .but my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17-18). The Book of Mormon reasserts this principle, while clarifying its democratic, rather than hierarchical, application.³⁴

³²Centuries earlier in the Book of Mormon, a similar migration had been prompted by direct communication from God: "And it came to pass that Jared spake again unto his brother, saying: Go and inquire of the Lord whether he will drive us out of the land. . . . And it came to pass that the Lord did hear the brother of Jared, . . . and said unto him: Go to and gather together thy flocks. . .and thy families" (Ether 1:38-41).

³³Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, eds. James Mulholland, Robert B. Thompson, William W. Phelps, Willard Richards, George A. Smith and later, B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1902-12; 2d. ed., rev., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1951), 6:58.

³⁴In the early LDS church, of course, personal revelation is circumscribed by principles of ecclesiastical stewardship or jurisdiction. Hiram Page claimed revelations through a seer stone, and was instructed (in a precedent-setting reproof) that only the president of the church is entitled to receive revelation for the church as a whole: "For, behold, these things have not been appointed unto him, neither shall anything be appointed unto any of this

REVELATION AND PROXIMATE CONCERN

What then of the substance of revelation? The Book of Mormon may grapple with the “exegesis of existence” or matters of “ultimate concern,” but that doesn’t seem to be the point of most of the revelatory process we witness here. Questions prompting divine replies are in turn quotidian, pragmatic, and at times almost banal in their mundane specificity. While still in the wilderness on their way to the promised land, Nephi and his brothers lose their weapons and their people suffer hunger and discouragement. Nephi fashions a new bow and asks his father where to hunt: “And it came to pass that he did inquire of the Lord. . . .” The answer comes (this time by means of the Liahona) directing him to a successful hunt” (1 Nephi 16:24-31).

Much later in the record, on two occasions, military plans are informed by divine revelation. Alma is asked by Zoram, a chief captain, to inquire “whither the Lord would that they should go into the wilderness in search of their brethren, who had been taken captive by the Lamanites.” Thus, “Alma inquired of the Lord concerning the matter. And Alma returned and said unto them: Behold, the Lamanites will cross the river Sidon in the south wilderness. . . . There shall ye meet them. . . . and there the Lord will deliver unto thee they brethren.” (Alma 16:5-6). A few years and campaigns later, Captain Moroni “sent certain men unto him, desiring him that he should inquire of the Lord whither the armies of the Nephites should go to defend themselves against the Lamanites” (Alma 43:23). Once again, the Lord reveals the enemy’s plans.

Queries can also be of a strictly doctrinal nature. For example, Alma is curious about the space of time between physical death and resurrection. He “inquire[s] diligently of the Lord to know,” and receives by angelic intermediary a detailed account which he then imparts to his son, Corianton (Alma 40:9). The prophet Jacob, Nephi’s successor, prays for guidance in his ministry and records that “as I inquired of the Lord, thus came the word unto me, saying: Jacob, get thou up into the temple on the morrow, and declare the word which I shall give thee” (Jacob 2:11). He then transmits a discourse on humility and chastity. Likewise, Moroni, troubled by reports of infant baptism, but apparently unsure of its merits, appeals to the Lord for guidance: “And the word of the Lord came unto me by the power of the Holy Ghost, saying: Listen to the words of Christ. . . . Little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin; . . . wherefore. . . I know

church contrary to the church covenants. For all things must be done in order” (D&C 28:12-13). Likewise, sixth church President Joseph F. Smith officially declared that members’ “visions, dreams, tongues, prophecy, impressions, or any extraordinary gift or inspiration” must be in “harmony with the accepted revelations of the church [and] the decisions of its constituted authorities,” and pertain only to “themselves, their families, and. . . those over whom they are appointed and ordained to preside” (*Messages of the First Presidency* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965], 4:285).

that it is solemn mockery before God, that ye should baptize little children" (Moroni 8:7-9).

When Moroni inquires of the Lord in another context, it seems only slightly more than pious curiosity which prompts him. Pondering the fate of three Nephite disciples, he "inquired of the Lord, and he hath made it manifest unto me that there must needs be a change wrought upon their bodies, or else it needs be that they must taste of death" (3 Nephi 28:37).

In at least one instance, prayer about a difficult political problem elicits an answer. Unsuccessful in his effort to transfer jurisdiction over zealous apostates to the king, Alma takes his dilemma to the Lord in prayer: "And it came to pass that after he had poured out his whole soul to God, the voice of the Lord came to him," telling him that ecclesiastical dilemmas require ecclesiastical solutions (Mosiah 26:14).

We may contrast these examples with the assessment of Shlomo Biderman, that "Christianity is centered on revelation, which contains within it a message ('good news') meant for the believer. Given this message, what is important is the content of revelation."³⁵ In the Book of Mormon, what is important is rather the ever-present accessibility of revelation, an egalitarian access to truths ranging from the sublime to the mundane, from principles of salvation to the location of game.

The redemptive role of Jesus Christ is the central tenet of which the Book of Mormon testifies, but conditioned as that knowledge is on spiritual channels, the Book of Mormon gives at least as much attention to the mode as to the object of revelation. When Amaleki closes the record known as the Small Plates of Nephi, his final words, spoken by way of both summation of past experience and admonition to posterity, are an exhortation to "believe in prophesying, and in revelations," as well as other spiritual gifts (Omni 1:25).

Alma, a few years later, testifies to his sons of his own experience with revealed knowledge: "Behold, I have fasted and prayed many days that I might know these things of myself. And now I do know of myself that these things are true." Yet again, "I would not that ye should think that I know these things of myself, but it is the Spirit of God which is in me which maketh these things known unto me" (Alma 5:46; 38:6). Helaman continues the theme, writing, "Behold now, I do not say that these things shall be, of myself, because it is not of myself that I know these things; but behold, I know that these things are true because the Lord God has made them known unto me" (Hel. 7:29).

In spite of the recurrent testimonies of the Nephite prophets who affirm the principle of personal revelation, the majority of Nephite history, like its Old Testament counterpart, is one of spiritual blindness and

³⁵Shlomo Biderman, *Scripture and Knowledge: An Essay on Religious Epistemology* (New York: Brill, 1995), 11.

apostasy. However, in this case, the reader is invited to locate a different culprit than the idolatry of Baal. Moroni, final prophet and editor of the record, proclaims his intention of writing a moral history of particular relevance to futurity ("Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing" [Morm. 8:35]). Writing with particular poignancy in the aftermath of his entire people's destruction, Moroni predicts that the same truth lost on Laman and Lemuel may well be lost on generations yet to come, and he repeats the same condemnation: "And again I speak unto you who deny the revelations of God, and say that they are done away, that there are no revelations, nor prophecies, nor gifts. . . . Behold I say unto you, he that denieth these things knoweth not the gospel of Christ" (Morm. 9:7-8).

Yet, in concluding his record, Moroni turns from lament to hopefulness. In his apostrophe to futurity (the most oft-invoked verse in the Book of Mormon), Moroni renews Nephi's testimony, presumably with the intention of shaping a more successful history than the one he has just witnessed: "I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost" (Moro. 10:4-5).

Judging from the near perfect symmetry of Nephi's testimony/rebuke directed at his brothers in the days preceding the first settlement, and Mormon's rebuke/testimony at the twilight of his people's history, and given the unrelenting affirmations of numerous writers throughout the record, we can conclude that the moral of this sprawling epic seems to be the indispensability of personal revelation as a key to spiritual survival of the individual, as well as the nation.³⁶ Moroni, however, as prophet as well as editor and spokesman to future generations, has done more than derive a moral from a millennium of record keeping. He actually serves to link the principle of personal revelation witnessed within the text to its enactment in regards to the text. His expression of this principle thus echoes this theme, but also transposes the text from a record providing a unified treatment of the principle of personal revelation, as

³⁶This is clearly one of the morals the early brethren drew from the Book of Mormon. As a church editorial warned, "The Bible contains revelations given at different times to different people, under different circumstances, as will be seen by editorial articles in this paper. The old world was destroyed for rejecting the revelations of God, given to them through Noah. The Israelites were destroyed in the wilderness for despising the revelations given to them through Moses; and Christ said that the world, in the days of the apostles, should be condemned for not receiving the word of God through them: thus we see that the judgments of God in the past ages have come upon the people, not so much for neglecting the revelations given to their forefathers, as for rejecting those given immediately to themselves" (*The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 2 [July 1832]: 13).

enacted by the various prophets (from Nephi onward, we do not hear sermons about revelation, we observe the transformation of their lives and the catalyst behind their ministries as tangible products of such revelation), into something else.

Moroni's editorial position outside the text allows him to objectify it as the proving matter for contemporary readers to have their own experience of spiritual validation. In other words, our knowing that the particulars of Moroni's history are true (like Laman and Lemuel understanding the allegory of Lehi's vision) is clearly not the point of his challenge. Knowing they are knowable is. In effect, Moroni has transformed the Book of Mormon's status from signified to signifier: Its ability to emphatically call into play the validating power of the spirit becomes more important than the particulars of its history or its doctrine.

RELIGIOUS EGALITARIANISM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Against the context of the theology of revelation surveyed here, Joseph Smith's "Golden Bible" was radically distinctive. The Book of Mormon patterned a variety of revelation which emphatically affirmed revelation's dialogic nature, a paradigm mostly at odds with historical conceptions of revelation, although not without some parallels and antecedents in nineteenth-century American frontier religion. In addition, the Book of Mormon was itself a locus of special revelatory activity swirling around the prophet. Finally, the Book of Mormon also served to initiate susceptible readers into a new paradigm of personal revelation, appealing in a highly successful way to a spirit of religious individualism. The invitation extended by Moroni was echoed and generalized by Joseph Smith and the Mormon missionaries, combined with an appeal to uniquely American sensibilities: "TO THE HONORABLE MEN OF THE WORLD," began one of his open letters,

We, in a spirit of candor and meekness, [and] bound by every tie that makes man the friend of man. . . say unto you, Search the Scriptures search the revelations which we publish, and ask your heavenly Father, in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, to manifest the truth unto you, and if you do it with an eye single to his glory, nothing doubting, he will answer you by the power of his Holy Spirit: You will then know for yourselves and not for another: You will not then be dependent on man for the knowledge of God; . . . Then again we say, Search the Scriptures; search the prophets, and learn what portion of them belongs to you, and the people of the nineteenth century. . . [Y]ou stand then in these last days, as all have stood before you, agents unto yourselves, to be judged according to your works. Every man lives for himself.³⁷

³⁷*The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 3 (August 1832): 22.

It could be pointed out that certain forms of personal, unmediated knowledge of God and his truths have persisted in spite of the evolution in the concept of revelation, an evolution which confines heavenly communication to divine enactment or historically delimited inspiration, rather than continuing utterance. In most general terms, we could treat mysticism as that tradition historically most resistant to such developments. Indeed, in his investigation of the nature of Mormon religious experience, Thomas Alexander found comparisons to mysticism useful, not to what he calls "the negative mysticism," the *via negativa* of the medievals who reveled in the ineffability of it all, but to "primitive Christian or affirmative mysticism," emphasizing "the open revelation of God to man."³⁸ In Joseph Smith's own day, his region so abounded in prophets and mystics that a contemporary wrote an account entitled *Humbugs of New York*,³⁹ and Walter Scott's Scottish heroine Jennie Dean provides a glimpse of a kindred religious tradition rich in revelatory epiphanies:

She reminded her father that Butler had not "his experience of the auld and wrastling times," when folk were gifted wi' a far look into eternity, to make up for the oppressions whilk they suffered here below in time. She freely allowed that many devout ministers and professors in times past had enjoyed downright revelation, like the blessed Peden, and Lundie, and Cameron, and Renwick, and John Caird the tinkler, wha entered into the secrets, and Elizabeth Melvill, Lady Culross, wha prayed in her bed, . . . and Lady Robertland, whilk got sic rare outgates of grace, and mony other in times past; and of a specialty, Mr John Scrimgeour, minister of Kinghor. . . . She contended that those ministers who had not seen such vouchsafed and especial mercies, were to seek their rule in the records of the ancient times."⁴⁰

Indeed, Joseph's own role in this regard seems aptly captured by Scott's praise for a final entrant in his catalogue, one "John Scrimgeour, that blew open the gates of heaven as an it had been wi' a sax-pund cannon-ball."⁴¹

Recent studies of Mormonism's beginnings have emphasized the movement's commonalities with contemporary religious contexts, growing out of democratizing tendencies which permeated the religious sphere. Harriet Martineau, writing in the church's first decade, captured the pervasiveness of this spirit of American democracy when she wrote, "It is common to say 'Wait; these are early days. The experiment will yet fail.' The experiment of the particular constitution of the United States may fail; but the

³⁸Thomas G. Alexander, "Wilford Woodruff and the Changing Nature of Mormon Religious Experience," *Church History* (March 1976): 61.

³⁹David Reese, *Humbugs of New York* (New York: Taylor, 1838).

⁴⁰Walter Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 471-72.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 472.

great principle, which, whether successful or not, it strives to embody, the capacity of mankind for self-government—is established forever.”⁴²

Ronald Walker, for instance, has written that “as we come to understand the New England folk culture more fully, we may find that it was not an inappropriate precursor to the Restoration. It is already apparent that this culture tended to be anti-traditional church in orientation. It strongly embraced the idea of personal revelation and the ministry of spirits.”⁴³ Historian Timothy Smith has likewise emphasized that this “‘witness of the Spirit,’ as the Methodists called it, [was] a coveted goal in all evangelical witness.”⁴⁴ Vogel writes that “seekers” and other religionists of the day were looking for just that paradigm held out by Mormonism: “Direct revelations from God—the desire of Seekers—especially in restoring the true church and true doctrine of Christ, was the promise of Mormonism. The Book of Mormon—echoing the gospel according to the Seekers—criticizes rational religion for denying the operations of spirit while at the same time criticizing revivalism for not embracing a radical enough concept of spiritual gifts.”⁴⁵

Gordon Wood finds evidence that during Joseph Smith’s time growing spiritual individualism often meant greater personal access to the mysteries of heaven. Although, he writes, in America “church membership had long been a matter of an individual’s conversion experience,” still, in this period the emphasis was growing more emphatic: “Countless numbers of people were involved in a simultaneous search for individual autonomy,” and “people were given personal responsibility for their salvation as never before.”⁴⁶ As he elaborates:

The disintegration of older structures of authority released torrents of popular religiosity into public life. Visions, dreams, prophesyings, and new emotion-soaked religious seekings acquired a validity they had not earlier possessed. The evangelical pietism of ordinary people, sanctioned by the democratic revolution of these years, had come to affect the character of American culture in ways it had not at the time of the Revolution.⁴⁷

⁴²Harriet Martineau, *Society in America* (London, 1837) 1: 2-3.

⁴³Ronald W. Walker, “The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting,” *BYU Studies* 24, no. 4 (Fall 1984): 430.

⁴⁴Timothy Smith, “The Book of Mormon in a Biblical Culture,” *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 6.

⁴⁵Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City, Signature Books, 1988), 90. Vogel has been criticized for reifying the generic “seekers,” “spiritual nomads of [any age]” into a sect or movement of Joseph Smith’s day (Grant Underwood, book review, *BYU Studies* 30, no. 1 [Winter 1990]: 120).

⁴⁶Gordon S. Wood, “Evangelical America and Early Mormonism,” *New York History* 61 (October 1980): 364, 367, 361. Wood’s is a thorough treatment of the pervasive demand, echoed by the Baptist Elias Smith in 1809, to be “wholly free to examine for ourselves, what is truth” (374).

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 368.

As one historian puts it, this search for a more democratic religion increasingly took the particular form of "insisting on direct, individual encounters with divinity. . . Seekers longed for the reassurance of regular spiritual encounters in dreams, visions, inner voices, and uncanny coincidences." Many of these primitivists eventually became Methodists or Freewill Baptists.⁴⁸ Another writer notes the appeal of such "experiential religion" to at least two other contemporary movements: "Thus there was a confessed likeness between the spiritualists and the primitive Quakers, who 'also believed in manifestations through outward voices and appearances, through dreams, and through inward spiritual impressions.'"⁴⁹

Finally, Hyrum Andrus has pointed out that one parallel between Mormonism and other primitivists could be a cause of great distress. While chronicling the history of Mormonism's disciples, he notes, A. S. Hayden described the dilemma of that group as one of susceptibility to Mormon preaching based on similar claims about prayer: "The misfortune governing the case was that many people, victims of excitement and credulity, and taught in nearly all pulpits to pray for faith, now found themselves met on their own grounds. . . Finding an emotion or impulse answerable to an expected response from heaven, [they] dared not dispute the answer to their own prayers, and were hurried into the [Mormon] vortex."⁵⁰ It may be only a slight exaggeration, then, to compare the setting for early Mormonism to the words of a spiritual, in which everyone wanted to "see bright angels stand/ and waiting to see me."⁵¹

In the midst of such investigations into the historical context of Mormon origins, it is important to remember that the quest for cultural consistencies can undermine the very project of historical inquiry which attempts to assess the particularity of a given phenomenon. As religious historian John Gager has warned,

If early Mormonism or early Christianity are merely warmed-over versions of mid-nineteenth or mid-third century culture, then we are at a loss to explain why these particular movements, and not their many contemporary competitors, not only survived but also flourished in such a remarkable fashion. In other words, the more we are able to demonstrate fundamental similarities between these movements and their surrounding cultures and the more we must dismiss their own self-understanding in relation to their cultural environment, the more we find ourselves unable to explain their success.⁵²

⁴⁸Alan Taylor, "Rediscovering the Context of Joseph Smith's Treasure Seeking," *Dialogue* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 22.

⁴⁹I. Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith, Jr.* (New York: Dodd, Meade and Company, 1903), 238.

⁵⁰A. S. Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve, Ohio* (Cincinnati: Chase and Hall, 1876), 197, 209-18, cited in Hyrum L. Andrus, "The Second American Revolution: Era of Preparation," *BYU Studies* 1, no. 2 (Autumn 1959): 82.

⁵¹Wood, "Evangelical America," 371.

In response to such a warning, it may be useful to consider that, like many religions of its day and before, Mormonism relied upon "the voluntary acceptance of revealed truth and thus on personal mystical confirmation."⁵³ On the other hand, unlike other religions of its day, Mormonism had a book of scripture which provided an unprecedented model for such confirmatory experience. Nor should one be too quick to assume that Mormon emphasis on personal revelation alone made it indistinguishable in that regard from contemporary movements emphasizing spiritual manifestations. For example, it may be true, as Adolph Koch has suggested, that "the Great Awakening, the first movement to unite the American colonies from Maine to Georgia in a common experience, opened the doors of salvation to all classes on the same terms."⁵⁴ However, some versions of the democratic impulse in American religion worked more to impugn elitism than to promote spiritual populism. As the Theophilanthropist of 1810 ranted, "The teachers of religion of all denominations assume an arrogant, dictatorial style, in order to convince their followers that they are in possession of the secrets of Heaven." Another issue asks, "What can a Doctor of Divinity. . . know of his maker, which is not known to the illiterate ploughman?" Of course, such spiritual egalitarianism does not necessarily make of everyone a prophet. The spiritual equality popular with many of the enlightened may be an equality of limitations: "The ploughman knows that there is a God, that he is just and good. What more is necessary?"⁵⁵

Even the prominent preacher Alexander Campbell, who accused Joseph Smith of plagiarizing most of his restoration principles, parted company sharply on the principle of revelation. Realizing the unmistakable centrality of dialogic revelation in the Book of Mormon, he saw it not as typical of the age or as primitive Christianity, but as ludicrous and downright unscriptural:

I would ask [Book of Mormon witnesses Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris] how they knew that it was God's voice which they heard—but they would tell me to ask God in faith. *That is, I must believe it first, and then ask God if it be true!* . . . If there was anything plausible about Smith, I would say to those who believe him to be a prophet, hear the question which Moses put into the mouth of the Jews, and his answer to it—'And if thou say in thine heart, *How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken?*'—Does he answer, '*Ask the Lord and he will tell you?*' . . . Nay, indeed [emphases his].⁵⁶

⁵²John G. Gager, "Early Mormonism and Early Christianity: Some Parallels and their Consequences for the Study of New Religions," *Journal of Mormon History* 9 (1982): 58.

⁵³Alexander, "Wilford Woodruff," 61.

⁵⁴G. Adolph Koch, *Religion of the American Enlightenment* (New York: Crowell, 1968), 286.

⁵⁵*Theophilanthropist*, in G. Adolph Koch, *Religion of the American Enlightenment* (New York: Crowell, 1968), 278, 338.

⁵⁶Alexander Campbell, "Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon," *Millennial Harbinger* II (7 February 1831): 85-96. Reprinted in part in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America* (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing, 1951), 2:101-09.

Similarly, Gilbert Wardlaw, an Edinburg minister admonished his American audience in 1830 using words uncannily pertinent to the Mormon example:

I am aware that prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit has been, and may be recommended in terms which Scripture sobriety does not justify. Some have spoken of this divine gift as if they expected something actually miraculous, something altogether new to the church in the present day, conferred independently of the word, and in a manner almost perceptible to the senses.⁵⁷

Enormous are the stakes when it comes to models of personal revelation. When religious ideas like these operate at the popular level, Rodney Stark reminds us, with their potential for social and theological disruption, "religious organizations take pains to filter, interpret and otherwise direct such activities."⁵⁸

This effort to restrain revelatory anarchy is clear in the editor's introduction to Wardlaw's 1830 treatise. Believing the minister's message was especially apropos of the "Revivals of Religion" sweeping America, he betrays obvious alarm at a society in which prophets and revelators were popping up everywhere.⁵⁹ Wardlaw asks "whether we have not misunderstood, and interpreted too largely, the ample assurances which God has given with regard to the answering of prayer." True, he admits, both biblical testaments affirm that, "among the various operations of the Spirit of God. . . were those which communicated miraculous powers of different kinds." However, it is to the "more common, and still more precious influences in the souls of all whom he renews" that we should look for our own answers.⁶⁰

Wardlaw's distinction here echoes that of John Wesley, who had distinguished between what he called "the 'extraordinary' gifts of the Spirit—languages and their interpretation, healing and other miracles—and the 'ordinary' one of hallowing, or sanctifying grace. . . available to all Christians." But who was susceptible to such outpourings, and to what degree and in what form, was clearly a subject of profound renegotiation during the religious ferment of the early nineteenth century. Caught in the center of these shifting theological winds, the Book of Mormon was alternately repellant and welcome, and both responsive to and a catalyst behind changing spiritual sensibilities. Historian Timothy Smith, for example, believes that after 1830, and reflecting the "constant appeal by Mormon apologists to the presence of the Holy Spirit in their

⁵⁷Gilbert Wardlaw, *The Testimony of Scripture to the Obligations and Efficacy of Prayer* (Boston: Peirce and Williams, 1830), 8, 59, 97n.

⁵⁸Stark, "A Theory of Revelations," 292.

⁵⁹Wardlaw, *Testimony of Scripture*, v-vi.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 8, 59.

community," attempts like Wesley's to confine and limit the operations of the Spirit diminished among evangelicals.⁶¹

A modern evangelical, in articulating just where Mormonism pushes the envelope of orthodoxy too far, finds danger exactly where Campbell and Wardlaw did more than a century and a half earlier: "Without some external checks and balances, it is simply too easy to misinterpret God's answer when we try to apply a test like that of Moroni 10:4-5 and ask him to reveal through his Spirit the truth or falsity of the Book of Mormon."⁶² Similarly, scholar of early Christianity W. D. Davies wonders if Mormonism's error is in taking "conventional modes of revelation found in the OT. . .so literally. . .as to give a facticity to what was intended as symbolic." After all, he writes, "the revelation to Moses as recorded in the OT can hardly be taken literally as an event in which the Divine handed over or dictated to Moses Ten Commandments."⁶³

Of course, this tenacious embrace of revelatory literalism is neither an arbitrary biblical fundamentalism nor a Book of Mormon innovation. It is, in fact, rooted in Joseph Smith's own first hand experience with revelation, a dialogic encounter with deity which gave indelible redefinition to the promise of James by simply taking it at face value, thereby setting both Joseph and the church he would found on a collision course with orthodoxy. In his personal history, Joseph's concluding sentence about the glorious theophany in which he participated as a fourteen-year-old boy was an unadorned affirmation striking for its matter-of-fact simplicity: "I had found the testimony of James to be true—that a man who lacked wisdom might ask of God, and obtain, and not be upbraided."⁶⁴ Subsequent Mormons would find in that theophany the basis for a radical conception of God's corporeality, one that abruptly and decisively shattered the Trinity of traditional Christendom.⁶⁵ For millions, the event has become, in retrospect, the first scene in the unveiling of the great and final era in human history. Church President Gordon B. Hinckley called that event "the first, the Great Vision, the visit of the Father and the Son to the boy Joseph Smith, the opening of the heavens in this the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times, the great bringing together of all of the work

⁶¹Timothy Smith, "The Book of Mormon in a Biblical Culture," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 16. Sermon by John Wesley, "Scripturalizing Christianity," *Works* 5:37-38, cited in Smith, 16.

⁶²Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 40.

⁶³W. D. Davies, "'Reflections on the Mormon 'Canon,'" *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (January 1986): 64n.

⁶⁴Joseph Smith, *History* 1:26.

⁶⁵The First Vision "undergirds the doctrine of an anthropomorphic God and theomorphic man, [and] of the relationships of the persons of the Godhead" (Milton V. Backman, "The First Vision," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* [New York: Macmillan, 1992], 2:516).

of God in all the past dispensations throughout the history of the world. The curtain was parted with that First Vision."⁶⁶ But Joseph's own summative comment was that when man puts a question to God in guileless faith and humility, God may choose to answer with articulate, discernible, unmistakably human words: "I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right. . . and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them."⁶⁷

Whether or not Mormonism's model was the first to appeal to radically individualistic cravings for spiritual experience with a literalized understanding of divine discourse, the Book of Mormon was apparently the most effective vehicle of the age for eliciting, condoning, and affirming such personal encounters with divine powers. Whether those dialogic and egalitarian features of Book of Mormon revelation have antecedents in Levantine literature or are prophetic introductions are questions that until now, at least, have been eclipsed by the powerful and historically verifiable appeal such features have demonstrated. As Martin Marty has written, "Historians cannot prove that the Book of Mormon was translated from golden plates and have not proven that it was simply a fiction of Joseph Smith. Instead they seek to understand its revelatory appeal, the claims it makes, and why it discloses modes of being and of believing that millions of Saints would not otherwise entertain."⁶⁸ Plumbing not only Book of Mormon commonalities but also Book of Mormon distinctness with nineteenth-century American culture may lend critical understanding to the poetic observations of John Greenleaf Whittier. The Book of Mormon, he wrote, spoke "a language of hope and promise to weak, weary hearts, tossed and troubled, who have wandered from sect to sect, seeking in vain for the primal manifestations of the divine power."⁶⁹ This American scripture has been the vehicle through which millions of readers have found their own sacred grove, and have reenacted on a personal scale the dialogic epiphany that ushered in a new religion.

⁶⁶Gordon B. Hinckley, Salt Lake Bonneville Stake conference address (23 November 1997), quoted in *LDS Church News, Deseret News*, 7 March 1998. As a standard source summarizes its significance, "The First Vision of the Prophet Joseph Smith is the beginning point, the fountainhead, of the restoration of the gospel in this dispensation" (Backman, *Encyclopedia*, 515).

⁶⁷Joseph Smith, *History* 1:18-19.

⁶⁸Martin Marty, "Two Integrities: An address to the crisis in Mormon historiography" in George D. Smith, ed., *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History* (Salt Lake: Signature Books, 1992), 186-87.

⁶⁹J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850* (New Brunswick, N.J.: 1979), 184, 191. Cited in Gordon Wood, "Evangelical America," 380