

Prophecy and Palimpsest

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IN 2 KINGS 22, the priest Hilkiah sends word to Josiah the King: “I have found a book.” Hilkiah had been busy locating funds to compensate the work crews refurbishing the temple, when suddenly the shrouding dust and shadows disclosed a surprising secret—nothing less than the Book of the Covenant or what we today refer to as the Book of Deuteronomy (or at least the core of it, chapters 4-33). The passage provides priceless information about the emergence of the Book of Deuteronomy. If only we had such revealing clues at other points in the history of the biblical canon!

The story of Josiah, Hilkiah, and the Book strikes deeper resonances for Latter-day Saints than for any other Christian group, due to the similarities in the way the Book of Mormon came to light. It, too, is said to be an ancient scripture buried in a time of religious and national crisis, only to resurface long afterward when its forgotten message could be heard anew. Today virtually all critical scholars agree that the tale of Josiah and Hilkiah hints at the very thing it tries to hide: that the Book of Deuteronomy was not discovered and dusted off, but actually created by Hilkiah, Huldah, Jeremiah, and others of the “Deuteronomic School” who sought to win the impressionable young king Josiah to their religious agenda. What is set forth in 2 Kings as reactionary (restoring the past) was really revolutionary (pressing on into a new future).

Again, virtually all critical scholars (outside Mormonism and several within) agree that Joseph Smith did not discover the Book of Mormon but rather created it. His goal would have been as similar to Hilkiah’s as his methods: In the confusion over which nineteenth-century version of Christianity to embrace—none seeming to have any particular advantage over the others and all seeming to be severely in want of something—Joseph Smith tried to make a clean break with the recent past and go into a new future by invoking a more distant past. In so doing he created something new—an imaginary Sacred Past, the way it should have been.

Seen this way, the roots of the Latter-day Saints within the Campbel-

lite Restoration movement make new sense. When the other Campbellite sects blazed a trail "back to the Bible," i.e., to the early church of the New Testament, they were unwittingly retrojecting onto the past their own ideas of how the church ought to be. Obviously Alexander Campbell et al. derived their ideals from a selective reading of the New Testament documents (noticing certain things and ignoring others), so it was not as if they created their scriptural prototype of Christianity out of thin air. By the same token, neither did Joseph Smith. Assuming he was the author of the Book of Mormon, Smith's fabricated picture of a pristine ("Nephite"="neophyte"?) American Christianity was in fact his own biblically informed ideal of what American Christianity ought to become—and, for a great many Americans, it did. Joseph Smith's creation and retrojection of an artificial, superior biblical past is, thus, seen to be simply the most dramatic and thorough-going of all "restorationist" creations.

NARRATIVE WORLDS WITHOUT END

What Joseph Smith did, as historical critics understand the matter, is exactly what all ancient pseudepigraphists did, and he belongs to an illustrious company: the authors of the Book of Daniel, the Book of Deuteronomy, the Book of Zohar; the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus), not to mention a greater or lesser number of other epistles attributed to Paul; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 Enoch; 1, 2, and 3 Baruch; the Apocalypse of Moses; Madame Blavatsky's Book of Dzyan; and a number of "rediscovered" Tibetan Buddhist texts. Yet is this a company of saints or rather a rogues' gallery? Traditionally apologist and polemicist alike have equated "pseudepigraphist" with "fraud" or "liar," and in a trivial sense such a characterization is correct.

It is that same sense in which a fiction writer is a liar and a deceiver. That is, even though the book jacket be labeled "fiction," the writer strives to woo the reader into that state of "temporary willing suspension of disbelief" which Coleridge called "poetic faith." For a time, the reader of a novel or the viewer of a play allows himself or herself to be drawn into the events of a fiction, to be moved by the fortunes and misfortunes of the characters, etc. One enters a fictive world, a narrative world, in order to feel and experience things one would never otherwise experience. We now recognize, as Aristotle did, the wholesome and edifying function of temporarily suspending disbelief. Yet it has not always been so. Shakespeare and others were obliged to reassure their audiences that what they were about to see or read was "The True History of Richard III" or whomever. Some were not able to understand the difference between fiction and lying. The problem was one of "bifurcation," the reduction of a complex choice to an over-simple one. One's alterna-

tives are not either "fact or deception," "hoax or history." For example, were the parables of Jesus either factual or deceptive? Did he intend anyone to think he was talking about a real prodigal son of whose improbable homecoming he had yesterday read in *The Galilee Gazette*? Of course not; he knew that his audience knew he was making it up as he went, as an illustration. This is the same kind of "deception" practiced by scriptural pseudepigraphists, whether ancient or modern.

It may help at this point to remind ourselves of the distinction between the author of a story and the narrator. The author is the actual person composing and producing the text. Let Herman Melville serve as an example. The narrator, of course, is one of the characters in the story, chosen by the author as the one from whose viewpoint the story is to be related. Thus, the textual self-designation "I" (or "me") refers not to the author but to the narrator: "Call me Ishmael." Does this mean Melville is trying to deceive us regarding his name? Of course not. We are once again temporarily suspending disbelief, entering into a narrative world. While inside, we are listening to the narrator, a fictive construct of the author. "Ishmael is certainly a tough old salt!" one reader may remark to another, but when they have both laid the finished novel aside, they will begin to speak of Melville's, not Ishmael's, strengths and weaknesses as a writer. Accordingly, we ought to realize that for Joseph Smith to be the author of the Book of Mormon, with Moroni and Mormon as narrators, makes moot the old debates over whether Smith was a hoaxer or charlatan.

"WHY IS IT THAT YOU ASK MY NAME?"

Envision the situation which led to the production of pseudepigrapha in the ancient world as well as the modern. It all begins with the closing of the scriptural canon. Josephus informs his readers that the authority of the Jewish priests and scribes has come to substitute for that of the ancient prophets since the voice of prophecy has long ago fallen silent. Christians reading Josephus often read him naively at this point. They cite Josephus and then point to John the Baptist as a renewal of prophecy after centuries of silence, failing to realize that Josephus was giving a prescriptive account, not a descriptive one. The priestly and scribal establishment position had officially closed the canon of prophecy. It wasn't that new prophets were no longer forthcoming. Rather, they were no longer welcome.

In fact, the Bible makes clear that prophets had never been particularly welcome. Like Homer's Cassandra, their voices usually went unheeded and were often silenced by force. If a prophet were sufficiently popular, the authorities had to appear to take him seriously in order to maintain credibility with their flock (c.f., Mark 11:27-33). The first step was to silence the prophet; the second was to domesticate his inconve-

nient oracles by a process of official exegesis. Jesus satirized this process as adorning the tombs of the old prophets while secretly building new ones for their present-day successors—like Jesus himself (Matthew 23:29-31): “Blessed are you when all men despise you and cast out your name as evil, for so they did to the prophets who were before you. But woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so they extolled the false prophets” (Luke 6:22, 26) of the past—and the true prophets after they killed them!

In view of this situation, what was a new visionary to do? He had a message to declare, but there was no point in simply announcing it publicly, only to be carried away and executed. Who would then hear the message? So pseudepigraphy was born. Whereas the old prophets had spoken their messages, the new ones, the pseudepigraphists, wrote down their oracles and circulated them in this form as an underground samizdat. They knew it was important, even when speaking in the name of the Lord, to also speak in the name of a famous prophet. One might have established one’s own prophetic charisma by personal appearances, as Isaiah and Jeremiah had, but personal appearances were needlessly dangerous. So, in order to gain a hearing, to have their oracles taken seriously, they wrote fictively under the names of ancient worthies such as Enoch, Moses, Daniel, Baruch, etc. Of course, the words themselves would ring with their own truth if they first managed to be read, and that was the trick: One puts Daniel’s or Moses’ name on it, and the reader soon finds himself recognizing the Word of God no matter the human channel through which it may have come. Did it matter much to an ancient Jewish reader that the Word of God had come through Isaiah or through Jeremiah? No more than to most modern readers of either prophet. All that matters is that one is reading the prophetic Word of God, and then it ought hardly to matter whether the real writer were Isaiah of Jerusalem or a later visionary appropriating his name (as in the cases of the Second and Third Isaiah and the Ascension of Isaiah).

LOOSE CANON

The closing of a canon is a momentous event in the history of any religion. It signals that establishment authorities (who caused the canon to be closed and chose what belonged in it) have decided the formative period of the religion is over and the religion must now be standardized and consolidated. They are setting about the laborious task of building the ark of salvation, and they don’t want anyone rocking the boat after they’ve built it. They don’t want to hammer out a doctrine of the Trinity, only to find some prophet popping up who announces the revelation of a fourth person in the Godhead! So the guardians of the newly minted orthodoxy—disdaining the doctrines taught in this or that gospel or

prophet—cross these off the canonical list, claiming the prerogative of rightly interpreting the contents of what remains: “First of all, you must know this: no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20). Thus, the long unwillingness of Roman Catholicism to open the Bible for everyone’s scrutiny. Zechariah knew the situation well: “And if anyone again appears as a prophet, his father and mother who bore him ill say to him, ‘You shall not live, for you speak lies in the name of Yahve’ . . . On that day every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies; he will not put on a hairy mantle [the distinctive “uniform” of prophets, as with Elijah and John the Baptist] in order to deceive, but he will say, ‘I am no prophet, but I am a tiller of the soil. . .’” (Zechariah 13:3-5).

In fact, these very oracles are found in a section of the book which critical scholars have dubbed Deutero-Zechariah. The original Zechariah was a sort of cultic prophet attached to the temple and its hierarchy, the very group who wanted to clamp the lid on populist prophecy. In order to be heard, someone—one of those later prophets “ashamed of his vision,” i.e., not daring to publish it under his own name—retreats behind the pen-name of an older prophet. Having discovered his imposture (though not his real name), we still call him “Deutero-Zechariah” or “the Second Zechariah.” The name hardly matters, but the content does, and this is why “Deutero-Zechariah” set pen to paper. If the sharp edges of the old prophets and seers have been smoothed out by harmonizing exegesis, then it is the pseudepigraphist’s aim to sharpen that edge by introducing new and harsh words under the prophets’ names. The new visionary may not dare appear in public, but neither will the authorities dare to condemn “newly rediscovered” writings by the old, canonical prophets. In this way, the newer prophets managed to slip under the fence built around the scriptural canon.

It may seem a great irony that a religion whose leaders claim the authority of the prophetic word as their charter of authority will at the same time be so opposed to receiving any new prophecy. Yet it is no irony at all, for the very notion of a canon of scripture denotes that the living voice of prophecy has been choked off and replaced with scribal authority, exercised by the official exegetes who will make the old oracles ring, not with God’s voice but with their own: “I have no word from the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the grace of the Lord has been found trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 7:25; c.f., 2 Timothy 1:2-3). Jesus “taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22)—which is, of course, why the scribal establishment decided they had to be rid of him! This is well depicted in Dostoyevski’s Parable of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* where Jesus reappears on earth and the first thing the church does is arrest him and condemn him to the stake! It has taken the church a long time to consolidate its ab-

solute power over the minds and consciences of the faithful, and they are not about to allow Jesus's living voice to return and stir things up! These are the battle lines: canon versus prophecy. The guardians of the canon use the fossilized prophecy of the past in order to turn back the challenge of living prophets: "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but, as for this man, we do not even know where he comes from!" (John 9: 29).

In short, both the new prophets and the establishment try to hide behind the names of the ancient, canonical prophets in order to claim authority. The establishment scribes use the corpus of the scriptural prophets as something of a ventriloquist dummy to spout their own views, but just as surely, the pseudepigraphists are impersonating the old prophets, speaking with their own voices while donning the deceptive Esau-mask of pseudepigraphy. The question is: Who wears the mantle of the old prophets?

We see the same situation repeated a couple of centuries later when both orthodox bishops and heretical dissidents alike claimed apostolic succession. While the Pope of Rome claimed to be the successor of Linus (Peter's appointed successor in Rome), Basilides the Gnostic claimed to have received his gnosis at the hands of Glaukias (the secretary of Peter). No wonder there were so many New Testament pseudepigraphs penned in the early church, and no wonder so many of them were excluded from the official established list! The same thing would happen again some centuries later when Muslim scholars decided they needed to establish criteria for sifting out false hadith from genuine ones, since all tried to claim the authority of a traditional saying of Muhammad in order to promote their own views.

Even so, Joseph Smith—bitterly disillusioned by the strife and confusion of rival Christian sects in his own day, each claiming the Bible as authority for its distinctive teachings—finally decided to sever the Gordian Knot of Bible exegesis by creating a new scripture that would undercut the debating of the denominations and render them superfluous. He sought to found a new Christianity on a completely new basis: a new scripture from the old source, i.e., more Bible, a third testament called the Book of Mormon. Just as the Protestant theologians followed the example of the scribes and Pharisees of old, resting their claims upon the scribal authority of exegeting ancient revelations, Joseph Smith also adopted the old strategy of putting forth his own revelations in the outward form of an ancient manuscript, a pseudepigraph. If writings of old prophets are the only ones taken seriously, then by all means let's write one! It's the only way to gain media access! I call it both "prophecy" and "palimpsest" (a new document written over an erased text on the same scroll) because the Book of Mormon was both an exciting new disclosure and an over-writing of an underlying text, namely the Bible—specifically, Kings and Acts mixed together.

However, Joseph Smith hardly intended to reopen the gates of prophecy to all who might feel inspired. His own pseudepigraph served rather as a new and ready-made canon, an authoritative pedigree to root his new community in the holy past, to give it instant venerable equality with—even superiority to—the established Protestant sects. Prophecy would continue, but only through his own mouth, as he soon stipulated.

THE SAME THING

Thus far we have tried to indicate how, far from being a mischievous or malicious hoaxer, Joseph Smith as the author of the Book of Mormon simply did the same thing done by the authors of the various biblical and extra-biblical pseudepigrapha. If we still wish to dismiss Smith as a hoaxer and a liar, or to put it another way, if we feel entitled to decree that God could never sink to inspiring a pseudepigraph (and if we think we are privy to the literary tastes of the Almighty, we are claiming to be prophets ourselves!), then we have no option but to dismiss the biblical pseudepigraphs along with the Book of Mormon. What's good for the goose is good for the gander. What's good for the stick of Ephraim is good for the stick of Judah. This point hardly escaped the literalistic biblicalists of the past, who tried to defend the historical authenticity of 2 and 3 Isaiah, 2 Zechariah, Deuteronomy, Daniel, the Pastoral Epistles, etc., just as zealously as they sought to debunk the Book of Mormon. A case in point would be Gordon H. Fraser, author of the polemical *What Does the Book of Mormon Teach?*¹ One can scarcely imagine him welcoming Higher Critics of Scripture to apply the same critical tools on his beloved Bible as he himself used to vivisect the Mormon scripture.

Such apologists/polemicists saw no problem in accepting the claim of the Book of Daniel to have been penned in the Babylonian and Persian periods and then sealed away to be discovered by Jews living at the time of the events predicted in the book (Daniel 12:4, 9), i.e., the period immediately preceding the ejection of the Seleucid tyranny from Judea. No matter that the "historical" descriptions closer to the time of Daniel are filled with linguistic and historical anachronisms, while the sections closer to the end are eagle-eyed in their "predictions" of Antiochus IV Epiphanies, down to his troop movements in Palestine. When Gabriel directs Daniel to seal up the prophecy and stash it away for the benefit of readers hundreds of years in the future, the same alarm ought to sound in the fundamentalist apologist's head as when faced with Mormon

1. Gordon H. Fraser, *What Does the Book of Mormon Teach? An Examination of the Historical and Scientific Statements of the Book of Mormon* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964). This is not to deny the great value of Fraser's research and historical conclusions. I mean only to suggest that his theological-apologetical conclusions may be premature.

claims that Joseph Smith “found a book” on Hill Cumorah. Of course, he does not see them the same way since Daniel is part of his Protestant canon while Mormon is not. Thus, the latter may be safely debunked and discredited (and thereby kept outside the charmed circle of the canon as if by a fiery sword that turns every way), while the former must be guarded and kept safe lest it lose its favored position within the canon and be “cast forth as an unclean thing” (Ezekiel 28) from the Garden of God’s Word.

However, in the wake of historical criticism (which one cannot prohibit when one resolves with Martin Luther to admit the Grammatico-Historical Method to the study of scripture, reading scripture as any other human writing), most theologians now accept that God might inspire an authoritative pseudepigraph as easily as he might inspire a parable. There no longer seems anything incompatible between a book being scripturally inspired and authoritative, on the one hand, and being an historically spurious but fictively edifying pseudepigraph, on the other. In fact, Deuteronomy and its theology are probably taken with greater seriousness than ever before in Christian history now that its true character (and, thus, its intention) can be understood for the first time. In the same way, a new treasure may be disclosed in the pages of the Book of Mormon once one recognizes the skill and the goal of the theological artistry exercised by Joseph Smith as the author, not just the translator, of the Book of Mormon.

SEER OR SECRETARY?

We have already indicated that Joseph Smith as the creator of the Book of Mormon simply used the same strategy as many biblical writers, adopting the outward form of an ancient manuscript as a metaphor for declaring that the coming of this Word was “from of old, from ancient days” (Micah 5:2). If we use that basis to dismiss the Book of Mormon as a spurious fake, we have the same theologically tin ear the opponents of Jesus had when they said, “How can this man say, ‘I came down from heaven?’” “You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham?” (John 8:57). Presently I will attempt to demonstrate that Joseph Smith followed the same method of composition as that employed by the various biblical pseudepigraphists, and he will come to look more like a writer of new scripture, not merely a discoverer or translator of ancient scripture. First we must pause to ask if, however consistent with the goals and methods of biblical pseudepigraphists, such a role for Joseph Smith would not be incompatible with his own claims for himself and Latter-day Saint claims about him.

In a word: No. We have already recalled the fact that, after setting forth the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith began to prophesy in his own

voice. The Mormon canon obviously contains many such inspired speeches by the Mormon prophet. In fact, the work of a prophet is not simply that of a transcriber or translator, and to equate the two is to deny the vast gap between Moses and the latter-day scribes, the distance between the prophet Jeremiah and his secretary Baruch, or between the Gnostic Revealer and the shepherd Muhammad 'Ali al Samman, who chanced upon the Nag Hammadi texts while hiding from his enemies in an Egyptian cave. According to the traditional story of the origins of the Book of Mormon, the role of Joseph Smith was more like that of John the Baptist—hardly that of a prophetic revealer, but simply the herald for another (in Smith's case, Mormon and Moroni) who would be a prophetic revealer. Yet this picture blatantly belies the central importance of Joseph Smith as revealer, prophet, and Moses-like founder of the Latter-day Saint community. He was a living prophet whose voice was the mouthpiece for God to issue regulations for the fledgling nest of faith. Clearly Joseph Smith is supposed to be on Jeremiah's level, not Baruch's. If not, we would have a problem accounting for the full prophetic dignity subsequently ascribed to him. Would not his "new" character as a prophetic revealer have to be understood as a self-exaltation against the ostensibly sufficient revelation of Mormon and Moroni? Would not Joseph Smith actually be interposing himself between scripture and the faithful? Would it not make better sense to suppose that the Book of Mormon itself was the first revelation to come by Joseph Smith, its author? Seen this way, Smith's authorship of the Book of Mormon would simplify rather than complicate—vindicate rather than discredit—his claim to prophetic inspiration.

REFORMED EGYPTIAN AS GLOSSOLALIA

The clue to this scenario lies in Smith's supposed use of the magical oracular glasses of the Urim and Thummim. These are said to have enabled him to find clear meaning in a text that was to him but a "field of signifiers"² or perhaps to create meaning there. The metaphor of the Urim and Thummim glasses is parallel to Paul's characterization of glossolalia not as a human language unknown to the speaker (an indefensible and absurd claim), but as the ecstatic "tongues of angels" singing the glories "which man may not utter." While no mortal may render their meaning exactly, it is nonetheless possible, Paul says, to "interpret" them. Yet this is closer to interpreting omens or dreams (nonverbal) than it is to

2. See Barbara Johnson's discussion of Roland Barthes's S/Z in *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 7.

translating a text. For example, Apollo's oracle at Delphi, overcome with volcanic sulfur fumes, often mumbled in ecstatic gibberish, which an interpreter then rendered roughly into human conceptuality. To imagine glossolalia as a translatable language, as many Pentecostal defenders of the practice do, is to bring the practice into needless discredit since linguistic analysis has more than once demonstrated that there is no syntactical structure among the glossolalic sounds. Pentecostal literalists fear that if they admitted glossolalia is simply the inspired product of the Spirit-energized glossolalist, rather than the tongues-speaker as a stenographer taking divine dictation, the divine quality they attribute to the sounds would be gone. Likewise, we fail to grasp the metaphor of the Urim and Thummim if we imagine Joseph Smith was simply using something like a translating program on a computer.

If we have ears to hear, we will recognize the Urim and Thummim tale as a metaphor for Smith looking at America through the lenses of the Bible and at the Bible through the lenses of the American experience. The Book of Mormon was the inspired result—not an ancient text merely translated, but a creative extended metaphor. To defend the notion of a genuine ancient manuscript merely translated from an imaginary "Reformed Egyptian" language—for fear the Book of Mormon will otherwise forfeit its authority—is like the poor Pentecostals trying to convince themselves and others of the miraculous circumstance of their speaking a genuine ancient language unknown to themselves. In both cases, the proof of the pudding seems to reside in the eating, not in the package design and advertising slogans. Why defend a metaphor as if it were a literal fact when it is manifestly false, yet symbolically it might be profoundly true? Tongues-speaking is not a genuine foreign language. Likewise, the Book of Mormon never existed as a set of golden plates in a foreign language. Neither is the point. However, speaking mysteries in the spirit is genuinely revelatory, and so is a book which translates the frontier heritage of America into the language of the Bible.

Even the designation of the supposed original language of the Book of Mormon can be taken as a clue: The term "Reformed Egyptian" carries resonances, first, of the biblical exodus of Israel from Egypt, which Americans from Benjamin Franklin onward have seen as a paradigm for the journey of American colonists and immigrants to freedom on these shores. Of course Joseph Smith and his followers repeated the story of the exodus as they moved from the hostile East to the promised land of Utah where they could sit in peace, each beneath his vine, and where, delivered out of the hand of their enemies, they might worship without fear. Like Moses, Joseph Smith was not destined to enter the land with them, and at the same time, we cannot help but be reminded of "Joseph in Egypt," the persecuted young visionary despised by his contemporaries but called to greatness.

The enigmatic term "Reformed Egyptian" also signifies the new start Christianity would make in America under Smith's leadership. Smith had begun what he regarded as a reformation of Protestant Christianity. Hence "Reformed Egyptian" was the language which Joseph Smith and his Book of Mormon used. It was no more a genuine but unknown ancient language than is Pentecostal glossolalia, but it was every bit as much a super-verbal metaphor for new inspiration.

Thus, to say the Book was rendered from "Reformed Egyptian" was to carry the foundation myths of both biblical Israel and Protestant Christianity into the modern America of the early nineteenth century. It was to say that the great epic of salvation history was far from over, that it continued to unfold here and now. A powerful image for this was the discovery in one's own time of an ancient bible of American revelation, but an even more potent image for the same thing was the writing of a new chapter of the biblical epic in modern America! This is just what Joseph Smith did. There are not two authorities vying for priority in Mormonism—Joseph Smith's prophecies versus the letter of the inspired text of the Book of Mormon. Instead, there is only one authority—the divinely inspired prophecy of Joseph Smith—and the Book of Mormon is the fundamental prophecy of Joseph Smith.

LATTER PROPHETS AND LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Specifically, the Book of Mormon conforms to the genre of the "Latter Prophets" rather than that of the "Former Prophets." The difference between these two is that the Former Prophets are collections of prophetic oracles or speeches, gathered and recorded by their hearers and disciples (i.e., the Book of Isaiah, the Book of Jeremiah, the Qur'an). The Latter Prophets, on the other hand, are a series of edifying (and usually semi-legendary) histories written from a moralistic standpoint: When the people are faithful, God's reward follows them, but when the nation is unfaithful, they have only God's wrath to anticipate. Since the experience of the Babylonian Exile showed that the prophets had been right about all this, the exiled scribes and priests of Judah compiled what we now call the Deuteronomic History (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) according to the prophetic philosophy of history. They assembled many historical stories, sagas, and legends, welding them into one overarching unity. All victories were turned into deliverances by God, and all defeats and oppressions turned into divine scourges. When a king goes against God's Word, he is terribly punished, while faithful kings are honored by God. Another book of this kind (though written too late for inclusion in either "Prophets" category) is the Chronicler's history (Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Chronicles). Clearly the Book of Mormon belongs with these works. It is a sort of Deuteronomic history of ancient America,

illustrating its preachings with object lessons of the fates of wicked Lamanites and virtuous Nephites. It represents an artificial effort to extend the biblical histories of Israel and Judah closer to our own day.

It may help to remind ourselves what sort of book the Book of Mormon is not. For one thing, it is not a Gospel and does not even contain a Gospel, although Jesus Christ appears as a character in the Book of Mormon. His appearance is almost in passing, just as the Deuteronomic historians found space for several long and short episodes of Elijah and Elisha and their miracles and disciples. There are epistles, at least letters, but these are embedded (or "imbricated")³ in the surrounding narrative, playing a role analogous to that of a Greek chorus, commenting on the action as it moves along, so the reader can keep up with the flow. Luke uses such letters throughout the Book of Acts. Luke has much in common with the Old Testament Deuteronomic History, as recent scholars have noted, and so does the Book of Mormon.

SACRED COMBINATIONS

The ancients erroneously supposed that the stories of the Bible were historical reports recorded by witnesses to the events. Once scholars recognized the absurdities entailed by this premise and cast it aside, they simply put a bit more distance between the supposed original events and those who recorded them. Scholars surmised that those who recorded the stories were simply fixing in writing the substance of oral traditions. This would allow for considerable legendary development and other difficulties which had ruled out eyewitness authorship, but in recent years some scholars have questioned even this presupposition. There seems less and less need to posit a traditional basis for biblical narratives, or perhaps one may minimize the extent to which the biblical narrators were dependent upon any prior sources. In the latter event, the biblical authors would have simply derived ideas from traditional stories then retold them entirely from their own standpoint, just as one today compares Hollywood Bible epics with their underlying Bible stories.

It may be, say scholars like Randel Helms, Thomas L. Brodie, and John Dominic Crossan, that the Gospel writers did not so much employ oral traditions of Jesus as the basis for their work as they perhaps took Old Testament texts, disregarded the plots, and reshuffled various details and narrative sequences to use as building blocks for their own stories, which are then provided with a definite biblical ring without recalling a particular story. Helms, Brodie, and Crossan all break down

3. Roland Barthes, "Structuralist Analysis of Narratives," in Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), 103.

numerous Gospel stories into various phrases and motifs derived from this and that Old Testament story. Crossan isolates all the Old Testament passages cited by the Gospel Crucifixion narratives as prophetic predictions of the death of Jesus, demonstrating how the stories seem to have been composed not from historical memory of the events, but by connecting the dots provided by the Old Testament passages.⁴ It is not that Mark's account of Jesus' crucifixion (Mark 15) is simple reportage of events mirroring the "predictions" of Psalm 22—Mark does not even refer to Psalm 22 as a prediction. It appears as if Mark possessed no traditional story of Jesus' death, but only the bare preaching that Jesus had died on the cross. The rest he had to fill in. As his material, he used the collection of Passion "testimonia" drawn by early Christian preachers from the scriptures, especially the Psalms.

As another example, Thomas Brodie derives Luke's story of the anointing of Jesus (Luke 7:36-50) from the tales of Elisha in 2 Kings 4:1-37, the episodes of the widow with the vessels of oil and of the Shunammite woman.⁵ As Brodie sees it, Luke derived the character of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus' rather chilly host, from both the Shunammite (who is pictured as initially wary of Elisha) and from Elisha's disciple Gehazi (who fails in the healing mission assigned him by Elisha). The sinful woman who anoints Jesus combines traits of the Shunammite woman and the widow of the guild prophet who, at Elisha's direction, pours out the self-replenishing oil to pay her creditors. In Jesus' parable of the two debtors (contained in the anointing story), the two creditors were suggested to Luke by the creditors of the prophet's widow, who threatened to take her two children as collateral for her debts. Simon's invitation to Jesus was derived from the Shunammite's invitation of Elisha to stay with her. Her miraculous conception of a son led Luke to imply that Simon the Pharisee had a change of heart, a sort of rebirth. The debt of the sinful woman is a moral one while that of the guild prophet's widow is a financial one, but both debt crises are mediated by the prophet—Jesus in the one case, Elisha in the other. Thus, Brodie says, the Jesus story has been derived from the two Elisha tales, while not actually modeled upon them.

Helms concentrates on the Gospels, but also commented on another biblical narrative from the Acts of the Apostles.⁶ He traces a series of probable connections between the opening chapters of Ezekiel (in the

4. John Dominic Crossan, *The Cross That Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

5. Thomas L. Brodie, "Luke the Literary Interpreter: Luke-Acts as a Systematic Rewriting and Updating of the Elijah-Elisha Narrative in 1 and 2 Kings," *Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Vatican, 1981), 173-189.

6. Randel Helms, *Gospel Fictions* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988), 21.

Greek Septuagint translation) and the story of Peter's vision in Acts 10:9-16. Ezekiel has a series of visions which teach him what he will have to endure as a prophet of God. In the first one (Ezekiel 1:1) he sees heaven opened (enoichthesan hoi ouranoi), while in Acts 10:11 Peter also sees "heaven opened" (ten ouranon aneogmenon). In a second vision, Ezekiel is shown something (a honeyed scroll) and told to eat (phage) it (Ezekiel 2:9) while Peter is shown a great sheet of sailcloth containing all manner of animals, including those deemed unclean by Leviticus. He, too, is commanded, "Arise, Peter, kill and eat (phage)!" In a subsequent vision, Ezekiel is told to eat bread baked over a dung fire, something ritually unclean, which he as a priest is ill-inclined to do. He retorts to God: "By no means, Lord!" (Medamos, Kyrie), just as Peter does at the command to prepare unclean food: "By no means, Lord!" (Medamos, Kyrie). It is hard to resist the conclusion Helms reaches: Luke has invented the episode of Peter's vision based on the series of visions in the beginning of Ezekiel. Luke didn't even have to read very far into Ezekiel to find enough details to mix together into a new story.

While this sort of cannibalizing of old texts to fashion new ones may seem arbitrary, we must note that the technique is not merely the product of modern theory, as if modern scholars had simply inferred that the Gospel writers must have been doing something of the kind. Rather, these practices of recombining bits and pieces to create, in effect, a new Bible verse have long been familiar as a standard exegetical procedure of the old rabbis. For instance, Mark's citation of Isaiah ("As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" [Mark 1:2-3]) turns out to be a conflation of three Old Testament passages: Malachi 3:1 ("Behold I send my messenger [the word translated "angel" from both Hebrew and Greek originals] to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger [or angel] of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts"); Exodus 23:20 ("Behold, I send an angel [or messenger] before you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared"); and Isaiah 40:3 ("A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'").

Note the effect produced by the silent juxtaposition of the three verses. Mark's "my messenger" comes from Malachi 3:1. His "to prepare thy way" comes from Exodus 23:20, while "Behold, I send [my] angel/messenger before. . ." is common to both texts. This similarity had already led Jewish scribes to conflate the two verses even before Mark's time. The citation of Isaiah 40:3—reemphasizing it to make it say "a voice crying in the wilderness, [saying] 'Prepare the way of the Lord" instead of (as originally) "a voice crying, 'In the wilderness prepare the way of

the Lord,'” denoting the preparation of a clear path for the Jewish exiles from Babylon back through the desert to Canaan—also occurs in the Dead Sea Scrolls. None of the three passages originally meant anything like what Mark makes of them in combined form. We might question whether this sort of treatment of the biblical text counts as exegesis, but in fact it was characteristic of Mark’s time and of esoteric Jewish exegesis for long afterward.

The presupposition was the distinctly un-Protestant notion that the Bible, being a divinely inspired book, was susceptible to all manner of clever manipulation. Whatever one made it seem to mean, it must actually mean, since the text could not yield coincidentally such fortuitous recombinations. God must have intended any message the imaginative exegete could squeeze out of it by hook or by crook. There are various well-known Kabbalistic methods including Temurah (reading the Hebrew text from left to right, like a word search puzzle, to find hidden “backward masking” revelations), Notarikon (reading each letter of a word as the first letter of each word in an implied sentence of cryptic revelation), and Gematria (reading the letters of a word as if the digits stood for numbers, so that a given word would be interchangeable with any word elsewhere in scripture that added up to the same sum). New revelations excavated by such methods were called “combinations,” and to devise striking new ones was a mark of spiritual enlightenment. In Isaac Beshevis Singer’s novel, *Satan in Goray*, one particular Kabbalistic guru, Reb Gedaliya, is acclaimed for this: “He. . . adorned his speech with mystical combinations and permutations.” An angel proclaims, “All the worlds on high do tremble at the unions he doth form. The power of his combinations reaches even to the heavenly mansions. From these combinations seraphim and angels twist coronets for the Divine Presence.”⁷

THE SAME WAY

It would appear that the Book of Mormon must be the product of that same process discussed by Helms, Brodie, and Crossan: the scrambling of motifs and distinctive phrases from previous literary texts in order to produce a new text of the same basic type. If the Book of Mormon is the literary creation of Joseph Smith—who wrote new biblical-sounding stories by combining familiar biblical vocabulary and motifs—then we may do exactly the same comparative redactional analysis on the Book of Mormon as scholars have done on the Bible. Joseph Smith’s fundamental source material still survives: the Bible. Furthermore, like

7. Isaac Beshevis Singer, *Satan in Goray* (NY: Fawcett Crest, 1980), pp. 140, 146-147.

the Gospel writers as understood by Crossan, Brodie and Helms, Joseph Smith seems to have created new holy fictions by shredding the old ones and reassembling the pieces in wholly new combinations. His method appears to be precisely that of the old rabbis and the New Testament evangelists. Not only did Joseph Smith do the same thing biblical writers did to produce a new Bible text, he even did it the same way.

All of which allows us to propose a way in which mainstream biblical scholars and students of the Book of Mormon may come closer together. Biblical scholars ought to realize (as many no doubt do) that the Book of Mormon is much the same sort of thing as the Bible they so love, and it ought to receive the same respect. It is no more a hoax than Deuteronomy. Mormons ought to be more open to the possibility that the Book of Mormon originated as a modern pseudepigraph, the work of Joseph Smith himself. As we have seen, this would only enhance Smith's prophetic dignity, not debunk it as literal-minded critics of Mormonism have always jeered. The most important boon thus gained would be a quantum leap in interpretative possibilities. With the aid of tools like redaction and literary criticism, we may disclose theological riches in the Book of Mormon text which, on the presupposition of literalism, have remained as buried as the Golden Plates themselves until Joseph Smith disclosed them.