The Education of a Bible Scholar

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I first heard the tales of Hugh Nibley, the brilliant and eccentric LDS scholar whose fertile and fecund brain defended and expanded the faith of thoughtful Church members, virtually at my mother's knee. I remember as a child listening rapt with wonder at the accounts of his marvelous ability with languages, his wartime service with Allied Army intelligence, and his vast knowledge of things ancient and arcane. I was also, as time went on, delighted by the news that he was also reputed to be conversant in many scientific fields—a Mormon Renaissance man, as it were. I'm not sure I wanted to be Dr. Nibley, but the job sounded fun. When I was eleven, those stories combined with reading a brief biographical sketch of Leonardo da Vinci by Dan Q. Posin[1] to fix my desire that some day, somehow, mine would be a life of the mind. I read and studied passionately, compulsively, and indiscriminately in pursuit of that vague but compelling ideal.

It was an easy choice in those days. The space race and the Sputnik scare meant that cultivating intellect—albeit with more emphasis on science and engineering—was rightly considered a matter of national security. Funding for education poured out like water; and by the time I started first grade at Liberty Elementary School in Salem, Oregon, all those marvelous learning tools were there, waiting for me. I was a voracious reader to begin with and was always engaged in learning of one form or another. Unfortunately, one of those tools was "New Math," which confused and frustrated me to the point where my earliest love, science, did not seem like a viable career for me in the end.

There remained the humanities, which was fine. In high school I excelled in theater and music, but choosing a specific field wasn't easy. Before my mission, I had majored in theater at

Ricks College. After my mission I had attended BYU and mucked about in majors ranging from earth science to filmmaking. Then, my parents and my local Church leaders made a rather intriguing suggestion: pursue some line of study that would equip me to work for the Church, ideally as a teacher in the Church Educational System or perhaps even as a professor at BYU. This seemed a reasonable choice. I had always done well in seminary. I had been well prepared for my mission. I knew the scriptures better than most of my contemporaries. Moreover, I had seen enough of the liberal arts to know that running with the Muses was a very hard dollar. Our family had not known affluence and had more than our share of tight times, and I wanted to avoid that. Working for the Church seemed like a good way to find economic security.

Some long talks with my parents ensued. I also had a very interesting and memorable interview with our local stake president who was a CES employee. He gave me a good picture of what it was like to work for CES. "The Church is a good employer," he advised and went on to say he felt that I would be an excellent teacher of scripture and related topics. I was inspired by that compliment. Moreover, I respected this man and was grateful that he had taken an interest in me and my career. I took his words to heart.

There remained the question of a major. At first I toyed with the idea of studying classics and looked into a few programs, particularly one at the University of Oregon. But while leafing through a BYU course catalog, I saw the major in Near Eastern studies. At once I knew that this was exactly what I needed to prepare myself to be a teacher of ancient scripture. I could also take the classes I'd need to enter CES as a seminary or institute teacher.

So, in the fall of 1982, I returned to BYU with the goal of getting a degree in Near Eastern studies. My days began with a Hebrew class every day, very, very early in the morning. It was followed by classes in Near Eastern history from David Montgomery, biblical archaeology with John Lundquist, and gradually expanded to other topics and languages: Near Eastern mythology, Ugaritic, "temples and texts," and a course on Arab-Israeli politics from Donna Lee Bowen. As I got better at Hebrew, I began to dig into the secondary literature on biblical scholarship, and there encountered modern biblical criticism for the first time—something I had only vaguely heard of. But before long I would be saturated

in this discipline. The result was a broader, richer, and deeper view of scripture. It also rendered untenable my plans of becoming a CES employee.

The discipline of "biblical criticism" rests on the same proposition as any other form of rational inquiry, namely, that if something is important, the curious mind will demand to know how it came to be, how it works, and why it is so important. Obviously, the Bible qualifies as important, not merely as an object of cultural significance, but as a cornerstone of western spirituality for the last two millennia.

Modern biblical criticism is also the response to the failure of traditional ecclesiastical scholarship to satisfy post-Enlightenment intellectual sensibilities when they confront the difficulties raised by the biblical text. In centuries and millennia past, oddities such as content that is repeated (but repeated with variations), apparent contradictions, or odd or inexplicable turns of phrase were usually explained as manifestations of the text's intrinsically sacred nature. For example, passages containing words or ideas repeated with variations elsewhere were explained by interpreters as nonetheless having value, for any single passage of the word of God can be interpreted in many different ways. By the time of the early Christians, allegory was a common means of reading—and writing—the Bible. The "facts" of the text were less important than its "point." King Herod's infamous slaughter of the innocents is not mentioned in the otherwise highly detailed biography of Herod written by Josephus, which argues strongly against its historicity. So when Matthew's narrative describes Jesus escaping Herod's slaughter of the innocents when his parents flee into Egypt, the Gospel of Matthew is less concerned with telling history as it is than with drawing an explicit parallel between Jesus and Moses. While some aspects of the allegorical method can be useful, it was also common for some allegorical interpreters to take some small aspect of the text and from it derive entire stories or lessons that the average modern reader would find difficult to accept as truly part of the original author's intent. Modern biblical scholarship strives to discover or at least roughly triangulate the original author's intent.

These traditional ways of reading scripture proved less valu-

able in the years following the Renaissance. The desire to have better translations of holy writ prompted scholars to begin taking a closer look at the language and grammar of ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Moreover, scholars such as Lorenzo Valla (1407–57) and Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) began to emphasize linguistic, historical, and philosophical considerations over traditional scholastic theology. While they favored using the text to draw moral and theological lessons, they dismissed the more fanciful allegorical methods of their predecessors. Their work led to a much improved understanding of the New Testament in particular, and translations far superior to those available before.[2]

The Reformation continued in a similar vein, building on the advances in linguistics and generally rejecting elaborate allegorical interpretation. This led to a tendency to read the text more literally, which in some cases eventually mutated into modern notions of biblical literalism and inerrancy.

The earliest precursors of modern biblical criticism fall under the category of text criticism, and were originally used in the field of classics to try to create the best possible edition of an ancient text. Textual criticism assumes that there was an original text (German, *Urtext*) in which stories, oral tradition, law, and so forth were set down in writing, which then evolved over time. As with any ancient text, it would be subject to scribal errors, additions, censoring, editing, reediting, translations, and changes in the meaning of words and even the language. The tools of textual criticism are intended to try to recover or at least approximate that *Urtext*, to spot and avoid the obscuring influences, and try to end up with the best text possible. What was not well understood until more recent times was that, in many cases, the quest to recover an original text fails to account for multiple versions written by the same author at different times, or that the "original" text had multiple variations and drew from multiple traditions and sources.

Defining modern biblical criticism is not easy; it draws upon many disciplines and approaches, each with its characteristic strengths. It relies on close, careful reading of the text using sound scholarship and methods. But most of all, modern biblical criticism is the art and science of letting the Bible speak for itself, unencumbered by the weight of extraneous traditions and inter-

pretations imposed upon it by the needs of its readers. It is not "criticism" in the sense of disparagement or disapproval, but rather in the sense of the Greek root of "criticism" (*krino*, "to judge, weigh, evaluate"). Thus, modern biblical criticism strives to achieve considered judgments that answer old questions while raising fresh ones.

Biblical criticism and each of its sub-disciplines is therefore another way of reading the text. However, most types of biblical criticism share a common set of assumptions, such as the need to approach the text in its original language, acknowledging that the text and its precursors have evolved over time, that outside cultural influences and even religious syncretism manifest themselves in it, and that the narrative was used in different ways and understood differently over the centuries. It further assumes what is obvious but sometimes forgotten: that scripture is written in human languages by human beings using their own rhetoric, literary forms, and expressions to convey its messages. Perhaps the best overall guideline for reading the Bible offered by modern scholarship is to try and read the Bible as far as possible in its original cultural and historical context, bearing in mind that this context must allow for the process of history and the attendant editing, re-editing, and revision that each text was subject to.[3]

Perhaps no single aspect of modern biblical criticism has generated as much heated controversy as the "documentary hypothesis," first articulated in the nineteenth century by German scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918). Wellhausen proposed that the Bible, as we have it today, is a composite document containing different sources that represent different strands of religious thought. According to this hypothesis, these strands were eventually compiled into a single body and later subjected to additional editing and redaction. Wellhausen and his successors identified four main sources for the Old Testament, designated as P ("Priestly"), J ("Jawist," Yahwist, or Jehovah-ist), E ("Elohist"), and D ("Deuteronomistic") sources. Each source could be discerned in the text by certain characteristic markers such as style, which name was used for God, technical terms, other vocabulary, and subject matter. Although some early attempts went overboard in assigning bits and pieces of scripture to one of a multitude of hy-

pothetical sources, the documentary hypothesis in its mature form did not seek to dismantle the unity of scripture. Instead it was an attempt to make sense of inconsistencies and flat contradictions often found in the same book of the Bible and sometimes even in the same chapter of a book.

The documentary hypothesis explains much of the structure and some of the more perplexing features of the text, although like any other scientific approach it has undergone many changes over the years. A number of Wellhausen's original assumptions have been modified or replaced. But the identification of multiple sources as a means of understanding the biblical text remains a powerful tool for explaining contradictions and stylistic variations in the Bible and understanding the different editorial viewpoints that often created these contradictions and variations. Other methods grew up in the wake of the documentary hypothesis. "Tradition criticism" examines the history of the text itself, attempting to see how changes made to the text reflected the religious community's shifting attitudes and doctrines at given points in history. "Canonical criticism" recognizes that texts often define religious communities and that one community might use a text in ways that differed from another. This approach led to the study of scripture in the context of a given community. "Form criticism" seeks to identify smaller literary subunits within the text that reflect other types of early literature, such as oral traditions, rituals, hymns, and covenants. Their structure can offer a window into the origin and thrust of the text.

A fuller description of the modern biblical scholar's panoply of methods and tools is beyond the scope of this article, and in fact my later education did not stress any one school of thought or method above any other. As I mentioned, my original intent in pursuing advanced training in ancient Near Eastern studies was to be able to understand better holy writ. As I gradually learned about modern biblical criticism and how to use it, I came to appreciate how some critical tools are better suited than others for a given problem. Overuse of one or two methods makes for stale scholarship. Eventually each student decides which method will provide the most insight under a given set of circumstances.

Needless to say, when the Bible is examined in this way, one finds meanings and can arrive at conclusions that traditional

views would find foreign or even heretical. This dynamic has created tensions between traditional readers and scholars employing more modern techniques. Centuries of venerating scripture as the word of God have conferred upon it a sense of inviolability that, ironically, has frozen in place many nonbiblical accretions in the form of traditional readings that distort the text. Faith is, ultimately, based on or at least tuned to a narrative. When an interpretation seems to change the narrative, it can pose an apparent threat to traditional faith. This perception of modern biblical criticism and its aims is, unfortunately, common among Latter-day Saints.

While the tools of biblical criticism, whether they are textual, historical, literary, canonical, form, or any other variant, may not be particularly welcome in the average LDS Sunday School class, in the larger world of biblical scholarship they are used routinely. It is not an exaggeration to say that these tools have done for biblical scholarship what Newton's laws of motion did for physics.

However, in all fairness, we might say that the application of modern scientific criticism to a prescientific religious text constitutes a mismatch on the surface. It seeks to apply the logic and empirical values of science to a text produced by a culture that espoused a completely different view of the world and how it worked. Modern assumptions about the role of text, how text has been used, and the use of ideas communicated through it cannot be applied automatically. But while modern criticism unlocks all kinds of fascinating or disquieting questions and answers about how the text came to be, it also constitutes a slippery slope in which it becomes easy to pass moral and theological judgments on the Bible through a misapplication of modern standards and mores.

When considering the history as recounted by a text or the community that produces and/or uses it, many professional historians must assume that things happen according to the laws of nature. Miracle stories are read as expressions of faith on the part of the writer; only the laws of physics are sacrosanct.

While engaged in my studies at BYU, I usually taught elders' quorum on Sundays. I enjoyed these classes. The students were usually thoughtful and engaged. We all had a good time, especially when I could give them something in the lesson that most of

them hadn't already heard over and over again. It gave me a chance to share with them a few of the little-known tidbits I was learning during the week and get a taste of what I might be doing for a living later.

Student wards were wonderful for this response; they are full of people with extremely active, inquiring minds. But after I married a brilliant and talented classics graduate student, Denise and I began attending a local Provo ward. Again, I ended up teaching elders' quorum. By and large, the response was similar, as many of those who attended my lessons were young married men who were still in school or only recently graduated.

But there were subtle differences; and in my enthusiasm and inexperience, I didn't read the full significance of a certain tone for a question or an answer, or correctly interpret a look, inflection, or nervous shifting in one's seat as a challenge to something I had said. As the year wore on, I began to realize that a few people in the class were slightly uncomfortable with my teaching. More precisely, they were not happy with some of the content I was bringing in by using outside sources and commentaries that were not Church approved. Not knowing how big this problem was, I simply forged ahead, trying sincerely to avoid generating controversy for its own sake and to be respectful of all opinions and questions. Fortunately, the elders' quorum president was very supportive, as were most of the others in the class. But it jolted me just a bit to see in some eyes and hear in some voices a fear of the unknown or the unorthodox. I was startled to see their reluctance to encounter scripture on its own terms.

The most common mistake made by the average modern reader of the Bible is always to read the text literally, that is, as an expression of what the author actually thought had taken place or to take the words at face value without allowing for cultural or historical context, consistency with respect to the remainder of the text, translation issues, or any number of other important factors. To take one example, Christian adherents of creationism or intelligent design may downplay the necessity of a strict point-for-point correspondence between Genesis and the formation of the earth, but they nonetheless base their pseudoscientific agenda on their reading of the Genesis cosmogony. In contrast, virtually no creationists or intelligent design advocates appear among mem-

bers of the Jewish faith because they read and understand Genesis in profoundly different ways.

Religious movements evolve, along with their doctrines and dogmas. This developmental process is reflected in how sacred texts are used and sometimes in the text itself, due to changes, interpolations, or deletions of material. Even sacred texts are written by human beings and are subject to their foibles and whims.

Like most LDS youth I grew up hearing a curriculum of scripture weighted toward preparing us to serve proselytizing missions, with a fairly strong emphasis on apologetics. Missionary service was an exercise in presenting a more consistent, better-explained interpretation and understanding of the Bible and scripture. The prevailing assumption among ourselves and our teachers was that the scriptures reflected an almost scientific level of accuracy, the message was consistent, and our understanding of God and His relationship with humanity was constant and unchanging.

Most coursework in my major devoted little time to biblical criticism per se unless it was a specific matter of language and translation. My exposure to modern biblical criticism took place in the BYU library. Many scholarly works on biblical subjects assume familiarity with the tools of biblical criticism, and the Lee Library had an excellent collection of such works.

Learning Hebrew was one of the first ways to peel away the veneer of smoothness from the text as I had grown up with it. Even as a beginner learning the language, I soon saw hints of the Bible's unique, hidden character. I came to know the points where the text was unclear, its variant meanings depending on the way an unvoweled text might be read or misread. When I read the Bible (or any book) in the original, it suddenly developed texture and became a different book. As my study advanced, I discovered places in the King James Version where Christian dogma dictated the translation, or where textual difficulties had been glossed over, where even the original Hebrew bore unmistakable signs of editing, and where grammatical irregularities created ambiguity in the meaning of a verse.

Outside the Near Eastern studies Department at BYU and particularly among those who taught religion classes, there was and remains a very strong bias against modern biblical criticism.

Bruce R. McConkie's disdainful condemnation of "higher criticism" in *Mormon Doctrine* reflected the general consensus of BYU religion faculty regarding modern biblical criticism and scholarship.[4] The required religion courses either ignored higher criticism completely or would trot it out occasionally as a straw man representing the "philosophies of men" or godless intellectuals gleefully trying to undermine the faith of the Saints. Biblical criticism was, in this context, little more than proof that the apostasy was alive and well beyond the boundaries of Zion's pure doctrine. BYU religion professors also made it clear that their position reflected that of Church leaders and that promoting or using modern biblical criticism, particularly to examine Mormon scripture, was morally wrong.

A few of my professors in Near Eastern studies, however, understood and applied the techniques of modern biblical scholarship in their papers and articles intended for the professional journals. Discussions were rarer—conducted in smaller, graduate-level classes, if at all, or one-on-one office hours, in low voices and with the door closed.

The imperative of our field to examine the Bible in the original language and context enforces a slower, more deliberate and deliberative reading. The Hebrew Bible is a different book, in many ways, than the Bible we all grew up with. To find unexpected irregularities in the text suddenly made me reconsider elements I had noticed but dismissed as unimportant. If the Pentateuch is, in fact, the "law," why are there two versions of the Decalogue? Why does Moses go up on Sinai in some verses to talk to God but on Mount Horeb in others? If Moses really wrote the Pentateuch, why does he always refer to himself in the third person? And how could he write about his own death at the end of Deuteronomy? The explanations provided by religious tradition (both LDS and others) seemed forced and dismissive of those who ask such questions. The explanations provided by modern biblical scholarship were an alternative that respected reason.

Another lesson of modern biblical scholarship is a recognition of the vast gulf in cultural grounding that separates us from the authors of the bible. Ours is a world where scientific understanding and the laws of physics are the final arbiter, where nature obeys rules describable with mathematics. The average high

school student has an understanding of the world that is profoundly different from that of most people living in the ancient Near East. In that world, gods and demons accounted for almost every phenomenon or interaction in the everyday world—to an extent that even those of us who are strong believers would probably find startling.

One closed-door discussion in 1984 was particularly insightful for me. I was finishing a class with David Wright in which we were reading the Bible commentaries of the medieval rabbis. We held the class in his office because I was the only student who signed up for the class; graduate students had that privilege. Undergraduates would have found the class cancelled without a minimum number. After we had finished, David showed me some research he had been doing on the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) of the Bible. He was interested to see how the JST handled portions of the Old Testament that presented perplexing difficulties in the original text but which had been glossed over in the King James Version (KJV) from which Smith had worked. To his surprise he discovered that most of the changes that Joseph Smith made in his rendition were to words that had been printed in italics in the KJV. These words were italicized because they had no direct corollary in Hebrew. For instance, the phrase "he wrote" would be written with a single word (*ktb*), the pronoun being implicit in the conjugation of the verb. In the KJV, the pronoun would be italicized. To further complicate matters, it seemed that the JST addressed almost none of the trickier aspects of the original Hebrew text in any way. It was asking too much of credulity to assume that the King James translators had gotten every such puzzle exactly right; the only reasonable conclusion was that the JST was not concerned with those problems. David told me that he was leaning toward the conclusion that the JST was in fact, not a restoration of original material, but a commentary on the KJV. It was an explanation that seemed to make sense.

That conversation was an eye-opener for me. Here I saw basic tools of biblical criticism brought to bear on an assumption I had held since I became aware of the JST and one that was regarded as dogma in BYU's Religious Studies. Its dean, Robert J. Matthews, had done his doctoral dissertation on the JST and clearly believed

that it represented a restoration of original material. But David's closer examination of the text using tools of critical analysis revealed that this assumption could not stand—and did so with impressive ease. It helped confirm to me the usefulness of biblical criticism and its tools.

At BYU, the *sub rosa* discussions of modern criticism along with my own reading convinced me and some of my fellow students that these disapproved tools of modern scholarship had value and served a real purpose in pursuit of interesting and legitimate questions. It was clear that they grew out of a sincere desire to explain the biblical text. Slowly, quietly, we began to grasp how these insights could enliven the biblical text, revealing a deeper texture that demanded a more circumspect, nuanced understanding—one that required the reader to entertain some enlightening assumptions that others might consider disquieting or even dangerous. In an almost karmic compensation for this stimulating new understanding, the required religion courses taught by Religion Department instructors became correspondingly dull and unspeakably boring, for me at least. Sometimes teachers in the Religion Department who had a background in ancient languages followed the uncritical "party line" in the class teaching. Instead of leading students into the fascinating and beautiful complexities of the biblical text, they instead seemed to oversimplify the Bible to fit with BYU's ecclesiastical emphasis. For example, I knew of one professor who had received his Ph.D. in biblical studies from a major university; but during his tenure at BYU, he did not teach modern biblical criticism. Instead, he emphasized evangelical gospel teaching. Likewise, one of my professors brought a strong background in ancient studies to his work. I remember his wonderful graduate seminar on Hellenistic Egypt that gave me my first introduction to the early Church Fathers. However he seemed to encounter resistance from the Religion Department's administration when he attempted to direct his scholarship outside the usual boundaries as defined by the department's curriculum.

I finished my B.A. in Near Eastern studies in 1984 and immediately began work, still at BYU, on my master's degree. During that time, my fellow BYU students and I began to hear that highly qualified applicants for faculty positions in the Department of Religious Studies found that being trained in modern biblical schol-

arship and even ancient languages was more often an obstacle to getting hired at BYU than a plus. Further rumors (later confirmed) told how some of those in the department who had these skills but who had somehow "slipped through" were treated with disdain and even scorn by those who distrusted such things. My fellow students and I were disappointed by these reactions, since by this time our reading in the literature had been broad and deep enough to make it clear that modern biblical criticism was the product of sincere scholarship and honest questioning, not some anti-religious crusade. Indeed, most other religious traditions had struggled with it and had found a place for it among believing scholars. We found the Religious Studies Department's attitude stifling and dull. We came to feel that it was somewhat embarrassing that our university's religion faculty would be so outmoded and incurious when it came to serious scholarship.

Denise and I moved to California, where we settled into the Palo Alto First Ward. I was quickly called to teach Gospel Doctrine. Denise had been accepted into the Ph.D. program in classics at Stanford, and I had been accepted into a joint doctoral program in Near Eastern religions at Graduate Theological Union and the University of California at Berkeley. For the first time, I was able, not only freely to discuss, but also openly to practice the techniques I had read about. I was excited to work with and learn from professors who were fluent in their use.

The entire atmosphere at Berkeley was an almost indescribable contrast to Provo. Where I had worked and studied in an increasingly irritating environment of conformity, Berkeley appeared on the surface to be an exercise in barely controlled intellectual chaos. There were no such things as blogs then, but I found their antecedents in the form of passionate, fiery dialogues scrawled as graffiti on bathroom stalls, covering everything from nuclear disarmament to the artistry of Jimi Hendrix. It became clear at once that what I was seeing was one side effect of a truly vigorous forum of ideas. Virtually no subject was off-limits, as far as I could tell. And yet, while sniping and high feelings prevailed at times, the discussions tended to remain focused on the ideas. Graduate Theological Union, while perhaps less boisterous than Berkeley itself, was equally astonishing to me. Here was a group

of some nine seminaries of different colors and flavors, mostly of the Judeo-Christian variety, who carried on their own dialogues, maintained their respective identities, but still managed to work together in the interests of interfaith dialogue and ecumenism. They even pooled their books in a common library, which struck me as an astounding commitment to the principle of a diverse yet unified religious community.

But Berkeley also brought its challenges. Shortly after I got there I became acquainted with Edwin Firmage Jr., another Mormon who was pursuing a doctorate in Near Eastern studies. Soon after we became acquainted, he gave me a draft of a paper he was working on in which he examined descriptions of the translation of the Book of Mormon for support of the idea that it was a literal translation and that Smith had in fact been able to translate a real work of ancient history. He had skillfully applied the tools of biblical criticism to Mormon scripture and, as with the Bible, those methods highlighted uncomfortable and profoundly disturbing conclusions for someone like me who was more flexible than many at BYU as to my beliefs but still active in the Church. Ed's essential conclusion was that many powerful factors suggested that the Book of Mormon was not a historical document and that it could best be described as pseudepigraphic. In other words, it was a book authored as though it had been originally written by someone else. Pseudepigraphic documents were commonly written during the intertestamental period, the two or three centuries before Christianity, when Judaism taught that there was to be no more prophecy until the time of the Messiah. Those who felt a godly muse would pen their insights under the name of Moses or Solomon or some other famous spiritual figure and proclaim the "discovery" of a lost work of scripture.

Frankly, I resisted Ed's conclusions for a long time. I could now to some extent understand why biblical criticism induced such fear and loathing among the Mormon faithful, particularly those who felt themselves called to defend the purity of the faith as they received it. But I continued to think about it from time to time, because as a scholar it would be disingenuous of me to simply dismiss it without a fair hearing.

Another fellow Church member was Randy Hepner, who was an astonishingly articulate, brilliant scholar working on a master's

in theology at the Pacific School of Religion, one of the member schools at GTU. We met at the LDS Institute, housed on the outskirts of GTU campus in a grand old mansion that used to belong to the Hearst family. We engaged in several long, stimulating, and (for me) seminal discussions, including one all-nighter and another sitting on the roof of the Institute building watching the sun set over San Francisco Bay. Through these talks I got to know more about an aspect of Mormonism I had never encountered before. Randy introduced me to the works of Sterling McMurrin, Lowell Bennion, and other more liberal Mormon thinkers. I learned about an earlier, though short-lived flowering of Mormon scholarship written by scholars trained in biblical criticism: Obert C. Tanner, Russell Swenson, and Milton Bennion. I also became more aware of the scholarship of B. H. Roberts than I had previously been and discovered that his body of work included studies of Mormon scripture that were boldly honest and unflinching in their candor.

From Randy and others I also grew more aware of the growing tensions that existed between segments of independent Mormon intelligentsia and the General Authorities. Randy had helped establish and publish a few issues of a newsletter on Mormon theology and had encountered resistance from his local leaders for doing so.

After I was accepted into the Berkeley/GTU doctoral program but before we left Provo, David Wright strongly advised me to take its seminar on advanced readings in biblical Hebrew, conducted by Professor Jacob Milgrom. An ordained rabbi, Milgrom is also one of the top authorities on ancient Israelite law and religion. His seminar at the time was tied to his work on the Anchor Bible commentary on Leviticus, on which he had been working for some twenty years. The commentary was eventually published in three massive volumes, is the premier commentary on Leviticus, and is likely to retain that status for some time.[5]

I took David's advice and signed up for the seminar. As he had hinted, it turned out to be one of the intellectual highlights of my life. Professor Milgrom held his seminar on Monday evenings at his home, a beautiful house in the Berkeley hills with a spectacular view of the San Francisco Bay. In addition to the many books one

would expect to find there, it was also filled with interesting and original works of art, most of them with Jewish themes and several created by Jacob's spouse, Jo, an accomplished artist who also holds a Ph.D. in art history.

Each semester, the seminar would cover one chapter of Leviticus. Just one. On the first night of class, Milgrom would make reading assignments to each of the students who had signed up, usually about half a dozen. He also assigned readings or commentaries to keep track of as we went through the text. One student would follow along in the Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, or the Samaritan Pentateuch or one of the Targums (ancient translations of the Bible into Aramaic). My assignment was to follow in the medieval commentary on Leviticus by Rashi, a fourteenth-century rabbi who lived in France, and the Targum Jonathan. I also was responsible for following in a modern commentary by Gordon Wenham, and a commentary in Dutch by Henk Jegersma, which I was able to read thanks to having served my mission in Dutch-speaking Flanders. Milgrom also divided up a stack of relevant articles for us to read, according to our language facility, since the articles were just as likely to be in German, French, modern Hebrew, Spanish, or Italian as English. We would take our assigned articles and create summaries to hand out to the rest of the class when the subject of the article came up.

Our weekly sessions lasted about two and a half hours, including a short break midway through. In that time, we usually managed to get through about one verse per session. This had all been described to me second-hand (Milgrom's seminar was almost legendary among the Near Eastern studies students at Cal and GTU), but before experiencing it I was a little dubious about why it would take so long to go through a single verse.

At the beginning, Milgrom would pick a student to read in Hebrew the verse to be covered, then offer his or her translation. Then the questions began. Milgrom would ask the student why he or she had settled on a particular word to translate the Hebrew. He might test the student's understanding of the grammar or the context. Gradually the questions expanded to the rest of the class as we were invited to bring in what our commentators had to say. Milgrom would ask questions that seemed simple and obvious on

the surface but which proved, on deeper reflection, to be anything but. Next, he would call for any assigned articles with a bearing on the text. The students responsible would give a brief oral summary and pass out the written summary to be studied later. The opinions, conclusions, and reasoning of these article would be stacked against the text and what we had found thus far. Many years later, while reading about practices of Talmud study in Judaism, I realized that Milgrom's seminar followed the same format used in studying the Talmud since medieval times. Gradually, the seminar would work its way toward a consensus of how the verse should be read and its place in the larger context of the chapter, the book of Leviticus, and the Bible as a whole. It was an enthralling process.

But the seminar was also an intense, pressurized experience. You never, ever showed up to Milgrom's class unprepared. On one memorable occasion, he noted that the verse under discussion had an interesting variant in the Septuagint and asked who was following it. The student next to me sheepishly raised his hand and confessed that while he had read the Septuagint passage, he had left his copy and notes at home. Milgrom peered down at him over his bifocals and, with the smallest hint of a smile, replied, "You should have memorized it."

It was easy to pass this comment off as a humorous rebuke, until a few weeks later when we watched him trading memorized Talmud passages in Aramaic with a visiting Israeli scholar as they discussed the rabbinic interpretation of a particular verse. The rest of us sat there slack-jawed at this casual display of brilliant erudition. We were all put through our paces and gradually learned to apply modern methods in the venerable Old World tradition of rigorous, objective scholarship.

I learned many lessons during my two semesters in the seminar as well as in my other classes. The first was that, if I wanted to understand the text, I must be willing to question it at every level and do so relentlessly. This process was not just throwing interrogatives around, beating the text about the head until exhaustion or bias demanded that we pick a conclusion. Rather, it was a careful and considered weighing of every available fact and building a picture that accounted for as many of them as possible. I

learned that, by examining one small piece of the Bible in very great detail, I often found myself delving into many other parts of the Hebrew Bible and coming away knowing more about the Bible as a whole. Although Milgrom accepted and used the tools of source criticism and other methods of modern biblical scholarship, he insisted that, at the end of the day, the text must be treated as a complete unit.

Another lesson I learned was that good biblical criticism is very hard work. On one occasion when I was working on a paper on the creation accounts in Genesis, I encountered a problem regarding the meaning of the verb "to create" used in Genesis 1. My professor suggested that I do a word study, which required me to look up every last instance of this verb in the Hebrew Bible and compare the contexts, looking for patterns. It was hard, tedious work, but it bore fruit. This experience was quite characteristic of the kinds of work required to do biblical criticism well.

In retrospect, my professors and fellow students at Berkeley dissected the text of the Hebrew Bible in a way that would likely have caused considerable discomfort among my BYU instructors. At BYU, I had a sense that it was possible to look too closely at the text, that it was somehow fragile and could be broken by too much rough handling. Milgrom and others among my teachers at Berkeley and GTU proved otherwise.

Meanwhile, I continued to ruminate on the issues raised when modern biblical scholarship's methods were applied to the Book of Mormon. I recall distinctly when the question of Book of Mormon historicity resolved itself for me. I had turned off Euclid Avenue and was walking uphill toward the GTU Library. Almost between one step and the next, I realized that the traditional explanation of the Book of Mormon as a fully historical record was not tenable. A myriad of textual and circumstantial problems and inconsistencies that I had mentally swept aside or trivialized came to mind in what felt like an intellectual shockwave propagating through my brain. All the loose ends that had been hanging there, all the nagging difficulties (or nearly all) suddenly went away once I was no longer insisting on a literal translation of a historical record. The experience took no more than a few seconds; I probably walked no more than about a dozen yards, but it felt like walking out of the fog and into the light. The effect of that brain-

storm stayed with me the rest of the afternoon; and although I got to the library soon afterward, I don't recall reading much that day. I sat in one of the armchairs near a window and stared out, thinking long and hard about this new understanding.

One feeling that came in the wake of this moment was relief. I think I had been close to this insight for some time. I was frankly starting to grow weary of fighting against the problems that I had believed would compromise the value of the Book of Mormon if they could not be solved in ways that supported the traditional understanding. With this realization also came the idea that the whole life-or-death struggle to demonstrate the historicity of the Book of Mormon was not merely a pointless distraction but an impediment. The average reader of the Book of Mormon has neither the tools nor the time nor the inclination to find out individually if the book is indeed historical. They take it on faith, as the promise of Moroni 10:4 implies. But what can be demonstrated empirically need not and should not remain under the rubric of faith. For some time, it had been possible to see where the historicity battle was going. For years, the trend has been a shrinking defensive perimeter around the traditional historicity camp.

And should it prove beyond all doubt that the Book of Mormon is not an ancient document, what then? Does that render the call to serve one another likewise untrue? Are the wars and trials of nations no longer connected to the moral strength of their peoples and leaders? Do the consequences of arrogance and greed and neglect of the weaker ones among us no longer deserve our attention?

I realized that, for me, the question of historicity was a distraction. What mattered in the Book of Mormon are its transcendent ideas, tested against the canon of my life experience, the observations of my fellow beings, my conception of the universe, my personal spiritual sense and, yes, even my understanding of secular history. From that moment, the question of the Book of Mormon's historicity became less interesting to me and has remained so ever since.

At about that same time I began to sense intuitively that tensions between independent Mormon scholars and the Church leadership were increasing, although I could not at the time point

to any one indicator of that tension. It was mostly an increasing feeling of unease. The same tensions I had seen in my elders' quorum classes in Provo were manifesting themselves again, but with greater intensity, in my Gospel Doctrine class. Most of the members greatly enjoyed my classes, but a few were profoundly uncomfortable with my teaching and my drawing on unofficial materials. Eventually, in an effort to make everybody happy, I was given my own class so that those who liked the way I taught would have an option, but they were mostly younger people who moved away after they graduated or took jobs elsewhere. My career as a Gospel Doctrine teacher faded away.

By that time an accumulation of signs, large and small, had coalesced into a conclusion that what I had sought to gain and put into the service of the Church was not wanted. A couple of years later when the September "fall housecleaning" briefly made headlines in 1993, I knew that the gift I had sought to lay on the altar was no longer acceptable. I toughed it out for another year and then became inactive.

The 1993 firings of BYU professors and excommunications, including that of David Wright, by then at Brandeis, and subsequent disciplinary actions seemed to signal to the rest of the Church that the attitudes I had seen at BYU were to be normative and that the tools of modern biblical scholarship were to be regarded by orthodox Church members as implements of spiritual chaos and destruction. The Bible need not be subjected to such rigorous examination; to do so was to "look beyond the mark" or give too much credence to the philosophies of men. The King James Bible, supplemented by the Inspired Version and the Book of Mormon should be sufficient. This approach is understandable for those who are seeking confirmation of what they already believe. But the experiences that have shaped my personal educational and religious philosophy demonstrate that, if progressively deepening understanding is the objective, then I cannot be well served by techniques of reading scripture that amount to intellectually jogging in place.

Moreover, my experience at Berkeley and GTU refuted the idea promulgated by McConkie and his adherents that those engaged in biblical criticism are "men without faith" who lack recognizable spirituality. Besides Rabbi Milgrom, I took an excellent

seminar on the Dead Sea Scrolls from two wonderful Jesuit scholars, John Endres and Tom Leahey. I studied Hellenistic philosophy with David Winston, an observant Jew who could recite the entire Torah in Hebrew from memory. My teacher for biblical archaeology was Pastor Victor R. Gold. Later I received a Newhall Fellowship for a term that made me his teaching assistant for a class on the interpretation of the Pentateuch, held at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. During this rich experience I was helping to train a new class of Lutheran pastors while simultaneously teaching the Gospel Doctrine Sunday School class weekly in Palo Alto First Ward.

Other instructors of mine, while not religious, showed respect for the religious beliefs of their students. My dissertation advisor, Dr. Anne Kilmer, was such a person. Another was Dr. John Hayes with whom I studied Canaanite dialects. Even though he was an outspoken atheist and critic of organized religion in general, he never brought it up in class and made it clear that such sniping had no place in his class when any of the students might find such tactics offensive.

But my favorite example of the faith of my instructors was an incident that took place in one of Jacob Milgrom's seminars. One evening as we gathered, he announced to us on behalf of one of our students, who was in attendance, that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer and would not be able to finish the class as a result. At that point, he asked the student if she would let him pronounce a Jewish blessing over her as was traditionally done for the sick. She nodded assent. His demeanor changed somehow. Professor Milgrom had a deserved reputation for kindness and taking an active interest in his students' welfare, so the change was subtle, but still remarkable. Because the subject was the Torah, Rabbi Milgrom always wore the traditional skullcap when he conducted the seminar. On this occasion he also drew a traditional Jewish *tallit* or prayer shawl about his shoulders and stood up at the head of the dining table where we usually sat for the seminar. I remember him with his hands raised slightly, palms outward as if both to encompass those in the room, and particularly the student for whom he was about to pray. In his deep, rich voice with an unhurried cadence he pronounced the prayer in Hebrew, then

repeated it in English just to make sure we all knew what was said. It is hard to encapsulate in words the feeling that permeated the room as he spoke. His voice ached with tender concern, with unvarnished charity for a fellow human being; but most of all, it radiated compassion. An almost palpable feeling of warmth and support permeated the room. I realized I had been witness to a powerful spiritual outpouring.

If we want to understand the lessons of scripture, we must be prepared to question, modify, or even abandon preconceived notions. Sometimes oversimplified paradigms must yield to paradigms that encompass the complexity in a text. Spiritual perspectives must also, of necessity, evolve. Sometimes we may find that the beliefs we have held since childhood are inadequate to the challenges of adulthood and that, to be honest, we must frame our faith in ways that are supported by intellectual rigor and careful, methodical research. But that is the price of knowledge. It will cost us only our ignorance.

The Bible's value is in the way it serves as a sort of scale model of the human experience, the human condition. Somehow its readers always find relevance. While many traditions ascribe the Bible's authority to the status they give it as the literal word of God, a close, critical reading of the biblical text by itself reveals a forthrightness, humanity, honesty, and perceptiveness that demand attention. It is full of human failings, contradictions, ambiguity, and complexity.

What happens when we start to consider the language, the archaeology, the cosmic ideology of a text—very often totally different from our modern scientific viewpoint—and its cultural context? The text comes alive. More precisely, it acquires a biography and a history. It takes on more texture and dimension.

The view of the Bible that we see through the lens of modern scholarship is perhaps comparable to the image of the moon that Galileo saw when he first trained his telescope upon it. He saw vast geological features—mountains and craters—instead of the flawlessness that was considered becoming for a celestial object. But how much more tedious would featureless "perfection" have been! The Bible is a comparable object; it shows signs of struggle. It contradicts itself at times, making one or both conflicting accounts wrong from a historical point of view. It speculates. It speaks in metaphor

and allegory as well as narrative and history. It presents neither smoothness nor perfection in the traditional sense. Rather, it embodies the ambiguity that makes it a compelling scale model of the human condition as it searches for spiritual truth. That is what has made it so fascinating and so relevant for so long.

Through the eyes of modern scholarship, we see how the authors of the Bible struggled with their religion in much the same ways as believers today. To wrestle with questions of God, morals, ethics, and law, to seek to do well amid opposition or difficult circumstance is to take one's own small place among the great spiritual heroes and villains of history. We see that one can and should question established, conventional wisdom, for the Bible does. Often a book of the Bible builds on, interprets, or critiques previous books. Jesus rejected the "eye for an eye" teaching of the Old Testament (Matt. 5:38–39), and Ezekiel ascribed the destruction of Sodom, not to sexual perversity, but to its residents' refusal to care for the poor among them (Ezek. 16:49). It means that we must allow for alternate and even dissenting voices, for the Bible incorporates them into its very fabric.

Modern biblical criticism is not the practice of testing something to the point of failure or destruction, but the process of the refiner who strips away the dross and tries, however imperfectly, to see the Bible for what it is: a wonder of the human spiritual quest—warts, scars, and all.

Notes

1. Dan Q. Posin, "Leonardo," *Dr. Posin's Giants: Men of Science* (Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson and Company, 1961), 27–36.

2. Jerry H. Bentley, "Interpretation, History of," in Michael Coogan and Bruce Metzger, eds., *Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 317.

3. Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible* (London: Mayfield Publishing, 1992), 5.

4. Bruce R. McConkie, "Higher Criticism," *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 324–25: "*See* APOSTACY, BIBLE, EVOLUTION, REVELATION, SCRIPTURE. In modern times, the uninspired biblical scholars of the world—men without faith, without revelation, without the gift of the Holy Ghost, without a knowledge of the plan of salvation; men who do not accept Christ as the literal Son of God—have

studiously dissected the Bible so as, in effect, to destroy its divine authenticity."

5. THE ANCHOR BIBLE: Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991); his *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); and his *Leviticus 23–27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).