

# The Midrashic Imagination and the Book of Mormon

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*[From] the Midrash-complations, . . . we learn from what we  
know [scripture], that which we should want to find out.*  
—Jacob Neusner<sup>1</sup>

*Midrash invites us to be attuned to the many sounds that the  
text makes in our souls.*  
—Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso<sup>2</sup>

With the Babylonian destruction of the First Temple in 587 BCE, it became necessary for the Jewish Fathers to create, as it were, a “synagogue in exile,” in which the emphasis shifted from the temple to the Torah as the locus of worship. With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., the Jewish rabbis once again emphasized the Torah as their temple. During these periods and after, the text of God’s revelation became the focus, not only of the Jewish heart and mind but also of its imagination. These sages considered every jot and tittle, every caesura and metaphor, as God’s design and, further, that God intended, even commanded, the rabbis to search out not only all *possible* interpretations of the text and everything that lay hidden in the text, but more than this—to create all possible inventions and imaginative explorations that lay embedded in or suggested by the text.

Thus the Jewish Midrash, which runs to some twenty volumes, is a treasure house of “rabbinical exegeses, extrapolations, interpretations and expansions on the Torah.”<sup>3</sup> Traditional midrashim, based on both oral and written tradition, constitute an extensive library of Jewish insight into the possible interpretations of scripture.<sup>4</sup>

The word “midrash” comes from the Hebrew root *daled-resh-shin* which means “interpretive retelling,”<sup>5</sup> “to examine,” “to investigate,” to “search” and interpret. Midrash has been defined variously as “creative interpretation,” “a means of extracting meaning” from as well as “a way of reading meaning *into* the text,”<sup>6</sup> and a way to “derive homiletical meaning from [a] passage” of scripture, a process that gives “the narrative new life and make[s] it meaningful for another generation,”<sup>7</sup> “reconsideration and reinterpretation,” “narrative retellings,”<sup>8</sup> a process by which the “human imagination” illuminates “the hidden, holy meanings of scripture,” “to find, in the liquid, living language of Torah, a new way to meet God.”<sup>9</sup> In short, creating midrash requires creative engagement with holy writ. As Emerson noted, “There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world.”<sup>10</sup>

It is important to make a distinction between textual exegesis or commentary and midrash. In his *The Midrash: An Introduction*, Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner observes, “For the sages wrote with scripture, by which I mean that the received Scriptures formed an instrumentality for the expression of a writing bearing its own integrity and cogency, appealing to its own conventions of intelligibility, and, above all, making its own points. . . . They did not write *about* scripture, they wrote *with* Scripture, for Scripture supplied the syntax and the grammar of their thoughts.” Neusner makes a distinction between “exegetical” writing (“getting meanings out of the text”) and “eisegetical” writing (“reading meaning into the text”). He clarifies, “But when our sages of blessed memory proposed to compose their statements, and while they, of course, appealed to Scripture, it was an appeal to serve a purpose defined not by Scripture but by a faith under construction and subject to articulation.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, as we will see later with the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, various interpreters/extrapolators of the text over the generations have seen the story differently because of the particular circumstances under which their “faith [was] under construction and subject to articulation.”

This is why every generation has the opportunity (and responsibility) to read scripture with new eyes, minds, and hearts and

why sacred texts are always open and never exhausted. As the distinguished rabbi and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel says of the Bible:

It is a book that can never die. . . . In fact, the full meaning of its content [has] hardly touched the threshold of our minds. Like the ocean at the bottom of which countless pearls lie, waiting to be discovered, its spirit is still to be unfolded. Though its words seem plain and its idioms translucent, unnoticed meanings, undreamed-of intimations break forth constantly. More than two thousand years of reading and research have not succeeded in exploring its full meaning. Today it is still as if it had never been touched, never been seen, as if we had not even begun to read it.<sup>12</sup>

According to the rabbis, “What Moses delivered amidst the thunder and lightning of Sinai was not a final product but rather the beginning of a conversation between God and the people of Israel. Revelation did not end with Moses but began with him . . . ; the rabbis highlight Torah as a continuing revelation.”<sup>13</sup> Since it sees scripture not as the ending but rather the beginning place in the search for meaning, midrashic composition is foreign to many and even forbidden to some Christians (including some Mormons) because of their tendency to see sacred texts as fixed, inerrant, immutable, even closed. But scripture itself provides examples of this very process. To a significant degree, scripture comprises midrash on other scripture.

Perhaps no better example exists than the dramatically different retellings from a conjectured original source<sup>14</sup> of the story of Jael and Sisera as recorded, respectively, in Judges 4 and 5. Whether the longer, more poetic version found in Chapter 5 is of a much earlier origin than that in Chapter 4, as some have argued, or composed contemporaneously as others contend,<sup>15</sup> they represent dramatically different tellings of the same story. In the first account, the army of Sisera the Canaanite, which consists of “nine hundred chariots of iron,” is “discomfited” by the army of Israel with the help of the Lord. Sisera, the only survivor, flees to the tent of “Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite,” and asks her to give him water to drink and to hide him from the pursuing Israelites. The text says simply, “And she opened a bottle of milk and gave him drink, and covered him” (4:19), and then adds matter-of-factly and with surgical precision, “Then Jael Heber’s wife took a nail of the tent,

and took an hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground; for he was fast asleep and weary, and so he died” (4:21).

In Judges 5 the story is told in a starkly different fashion with detail, dramatic elements, structure, and irony—all absent from the version in Judges 4, although likely closer to the original source. As compared with the prosaic narrative in Judges 4, the account in Judges 5 is conveyed through poetry, song, and a variety of rhetorical devices into a sort of cosmic conflict in which all forces—human, natural, celestial, and divine—join to defeat Sisera and his mighty army. In this version, we are told that “the earth trembled, and the heavens dropped, the clouds also dropped water [the “dropping” symbolizing and foreshadowing Sisera’s impending fall]. The mountains melted from before the Lord, even that Sinai from before the Lord God of Israel” (Judg. 5:4–5). Through this allusion, the great prophet Moses himself is connected to the narrative:

They fought from heaven;  
the stars in their courses  
fought against Sisera.  
The river of Kishon swept them away.

Kings, angels, and the Lord join the fray on behalf of Israel. Now, notice how differently the author(s) portray Jael’s heroic deed than in Judges 4:

Blessed above women shall Jael  
the wife of Heber the Kenite be,  
blessed shall she be  
above women of the tent.  
He asked for water, and she gave him milk;  
She brought forth butter in a lordly dish.  
She put her hand to the nail,  
and her right hand to the workman’s hammer;  
And with the hammer she smote Sisera,  
she smote off his head,  
when she had pierced and stricken  
through his temples.<sup>16</sup>

And then (in spite of his severed head!), they bring him back to life, stand him up, and with deliberate rhythmic effect show his slow, crumbling descent and collapse:

At her feet he bowed,  
he fell, he lay down:  
at her feet he bowed,  
he fell: where he bowed,  
there he fell down  
dead.

The use of repetition and the slow, cascading rhythm of these stanzas draw us into the action, helping us not only to see the ultimate decline and fall of Israel's foe, but to participate in it, to feel it.

Not satisfied with the death of Sisera, the author(s) bring in his mother who wonders why he is so late in returning from the battlefield. The irony is exquisite:

Her wise ladies answered her,  
Yea, she returned answer to herself,  
Have they not sped? Have they not divided the prey;  
To every man a damsel or two;  
To Sisera a prey of divers colours,  
A prey of divers colors of needlework,  
Of divers colors of needlework on both sides,  
Meet for the necks of them that take the spoil?

Then, to nail the point home as surely as Jael nailed Sisera's head to the tent floor, the narrative closes with this supplication to Jehovah:

So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord:  
But let them that love him be as the sun  
When he goeth forth in his might.  
And the land had rest forty years.

This kind of imaginative, dramatic, and ironic retelling and restructuring is characteristic of the best midrashic treatment of

scripture. The Midrash contains not only such imaginative retelling of scriptural narratives, but it also contains alternative and even contradictory versions of traditional biblical narratives. For example, with one of the Bible's most powerful and perplexing stories—Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22:1–24), referred to as the *Akedeh*—Jewish writers (ancient and modern) have reimagined the story a number of different ways, some of which respond to questions raised by the text (e.g., Why is Sarah left out of the story? What is the impact on Isaac of what seems like his father's duplicity and incipient violence? How does this experience affect their relationship afterward? etc.):

- Abraham takes Isaac to sacrifice him but does not tell Sarah what he is going to do. Satan then appears to Abraham and Isaac in disguise, trying to persuade them not to go through with the sacrifice and later he deceives Sarah by telling her that Abraham has sacrificed Isaac. Sarah seeks confirmation and threatens suicide. Satan then appears in a different disguise to tell her Isaac hasn't been sacrificed after all, which joy causes her to expire. Abraham and Isaac return to find her dead.<sup>17</sup>
- In another midrash, Abraham instead of withholding the knowledge of their errand, chooses to tell Isaac that he is to be sacrificed: "Abraham couldn't keep the secret to himself. By sharing the ultimate purpose of the journey with Isaac, he included him in this ultimate test. And the Torah tells us that even after this revelation, 'the two walked together.'" According to this Midrash, both father and son accept the divine imperative with astonishing obedience.<sup>18</sup>
- In the *Bereshit Rabbah*, Isaac agrees to be sacrificed to prove to God that he is more righteous than Ishmael.<sup>19</sup>
- In a strange retelling of the story, Abraham actually slays Isaac on the altar, but Isaac is resurrected and Abraham attempts to slaughter him a second time.<sup>20</sup>
- Even stranger is a twentieth-century retelling in which it is Abraham who is slaughtered "while Isaac watches in horror and disbelief, wishing desperately to save his father, but unable to do so."<sup>21</sup>

• In one particularly dolorous version of this story, following the harrowing experience of the attempted sacrifice, Isaac goes blind and Sarah goes mute. In explaining such an ending, Judith Kunst says, “The imagined and specific aftermath of pain keeps the shock of the story alive. . . . [T]he stories of lingering pain in Isaac and his family keep the full impact of relationship with the Holy One alive in the Jewish mind.”<sup>22</sup>

As Hebrew scholar David C. Jacobson observes,

From a literary point of view, the rabbinic, medieval, and modern authors of these retold versions of the story of the binding of Isaac created new works out of the biblical text in significantly different ways that reflect each period’s literary norms and its attitude toward the Bible. Nevertheless, these authors share a common midrashic impulse to use the Bible as a source of characters, plots, images, and themes in order to represent contemporary issues and concerns. For authors of midrash, the way that a biblical text can serve as a meaningful vehicle for the representation of contemporary reality is by transforming it, sometimes even to the point of turning it on its head.<sup>23</sup>

As the last example of the Abraham-Isaac narrative demonstrates, modern and contemporary Jews, not content to let the ancient rabbinical sages be the only writers of midrash, have tried their hand at this inventive compositional form. These have been anthologized in such collections as David C. Jacobson’s *Modern Midrash* (1987), Naomi M. Hyman’s *Biblical Women in the Midrash: A Sourcebook* (1998), and Jill Hammer’s *Sisters at Sinai: New Tales of Biblical Women* (2001). See also the Institute for Contemporary Midrash ([www.icmidrash.org/](http://www.icmidrash.org/)).

For those who might consider it appropriate for only Jews to write midrash, in her *The Burning Word: A Christian Encounter with Jewish Midrash*, Judith M. Kunst presents a persuasive argument for Christian-composed midrashim. She argues that, in both traditions, there is an invitation from God to be passionately engaged not only in reading and understanding scripture, but in imaginatively exploring its deeper, hidden, and more expansive meanings. Indeed, one could argue that much of the New Testament consists of midrashic readings of the Old Testament.

As an example of how a Latter-day Saint might create midrash-

im, I offer the following imaginative expansion of the episode of Peter walking on the water as recounted in Matthew 14:28–33. In doing so, I have tried to imagine the tension Peter must have felt between his wish for the kind of power Jesus possessed and his own inner fears and misgivings about his worthiness to exercise such power. That is, beneath Peter's customary impetuous and boisterous demeanor was likely an insecurity which is symbolized by "the wind boisterous" (v. 30) that he feels swirling around him, making the sea as turbulent as his self-doubts. This is an important teaching moment in Peter's life, for before long he will be asked to actually take on the mantle of Jesus's power and to make a greater sacrifice of faith than he is even capable of imagining at this moment:

*When Peter stepped out of the boat and onto the roiling sea, it was as if his feet were on flat stones, so solid was the footing. When he took his first steps toward his waiting Lord, a thrill coursed through his veins. Incredulous that he, too, could do what Jesus did, he looked down at his feet and beyond into the blue-black depths. Then, just as he was about to walk on the watery plane, he saw the shadow of Leviathan, that great monster of the deep, and the devouring moon-eyes of the giant squid with its thousand-mouthed tentacles and the great devil beak at the center. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the circling black fins of sharks. He then looked skyward to shearing wind and the demon-shaped clouds and, at that moment, the water gave way at his feet and he plummeted, only to be saved by the grasped hand of the Lord, whose feet were still planted firmly on the seemingly solid surface of the sea.*

People speak of Peter as having doubts that he could walk on the water, but the threatening creatures he sees below the surface of Galilee and in the sky above symbolize the demons in Peter's subconscious—his doubts about his courage to face persecution and even death, his faithfulness to follow the Lord to Calvary, and his willingness to surrender his pride for the kingdom. It is his fear of his own weaknesses, not the water beneath his feet, that causes him to sink.

Midrash involves risk, just as Peter's stepping out onto Galilee's turbulent waters did. As Judith M. Kunst observes, "This is what imaginative reading ultimately requires: a willingness to step completely out of the boat and dive into the waters with a God who has declared from the beginning that we will not drown."<sup>24</sup>



Speaking of her own Christian upbringing, Kunst makes a distinction between her tradition's emphasis on information and the Jewish emphasis on conversation<sup>25</sup>—conversation with oneself, with others and with God about the meaning of sacred texts.

All of this is a prelude to my argument that Latter-day Saints should consider writing midrashim based on Restoration scriptures, especially the Book of Mormon. Since Latter-day Saints believe that the Book of Mormon was written by Israelites who began their long, exiled history in the New World with the Law and the Prophets up to Jeremiah, it seems inviting to consider it a source, like the Torah, not only for interpretation but for invention, expansion, and imagination. That is likely to take some adjustment in our attitude toward scripture where we tend toward a literalistic interpretation of the text and focus more on answers than questions, yet questioning is at the heart of the rabbis' encounter with sacred writ. The Israeli author Amoz Oz emphasizes the difference: "Fundamentalists live life with an exclamation point. I prefer to live my life with a question mark."<sup>26</sup> As Rabbi Sandy Sasso adds, "The rabbis turned the text and turned it again. They delighted in reading the Bible with question marks to discover not just what the Bible meant but what it continues to mean. They entered into dialogue with the text and added another voice in the room. And it was from these voices and question marks that they wrote midrashim."<sup>27</sup>

In actuality, Latter-day Saints should be comfortable with the idea of midrashic writing, especially since much of Restoration scripture could be so categorized. That is, it is possible to consider parts of the books of Abraham and Moses as midrashic extrapolations from or extensions of Old Testament or other ancient texts, passages in the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants as midrashic revisions of certain Old and New Testament scriptures, and Joseph Smith's inspired revision of the Bible as midrashic refinements of certain biblical passages. In his *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, Latter-day Saint scholar Grant Hardy argues that Nephi's citation of and commentary on Isaiah "offers something of a midrash (to use an anachronistic term) on Isaiah."<sup>28</sup>

So, how does one begin to approach the Book of Mormon as the old rabbis did the Torah and as many contemporary Jewish writers currently do in carrying on the tradition? To begin with, I

think we need to take seriously the idea that the Book of Mormon was written for us—for our times. As Moroni, the concluding prophet of the book, states:

The Lord hath shown unto me great and marvelous things concerning that which must shortly come, at that day when these things shall come forth among you.

Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing. (Mormon 8:34–35)

Ezra Taft Benson said, “The Book of Mormon was written for us today. God is the author of the book. It is a record of a fallen people, compiled by inspired men for our blessing today. Those people never had the book—it was meant for us. Mormon, the ancient prophet after whom the book is named, abridged centuries of records. God, who knows the end from the beginning, told him what to include in his abridgment that we would need for our day.”<sup>29</sup>

It was with the idea that the Torah was written for each generation that Jewish writers kept coming back to it to see what fresh meaning, what new readings it could yield. One of the reasons to keep open minds and imaginations to the possible meanings of the text and the possible explorations of what is only hinted at in the text, or what may not be there at all, but nevertheless relevant, is that each generation has not only the readings and inventions of the past, but new tools—both technical and critical—at their disposal. Also, both our expanded understanding of human and divine nature and the continual unfolding of history open new vistas to us. As Jill Hammer argues, “The Torah grows by reinterpretation. Through midrash, each generation can add its own wisdom and experience to a fixed text and make it dynamic so that it does not reflect a single era but every era in which it is read.”<sup>30</sup> For example, a generation ago, there was very little feminist midrashic literature. Today, it is one of the richest veins of the tradition as a new generation of women scholars and writers hold sacred texts up to the light to see what new meanings shine through them.<sup>31</sup>

In my “Toward a Feminist Mormon Midrash,” I outline a number of ways in which contemporary Mormon women could begin exploring the midrashic possibilities not only of the central texts

of the Judeo-Christian tradition but of Restoration texts as well, especially the Book of Mormon.<sup>32</sup> I suggest, for example, that Mormon women could name, clothe, and create lives for the many anonymous female characters in the Book of Mormon who are referred to only by their generic identities: wife/wives (80 times), daughter/daughters (76), woman/women (55), mother/mothers (17), concubine/harlot/harlots (15), widow/widows (7), female (5), and maidservant/maid/mistress (3).<sup>33</sup> A rising generation of girls and young women, to say nothing of the adult women who have come to the Book of Mormon looking for mirrors of their own lives in the lives of these ancient people, can find very little by way of models. While it is true that all readers have Nephi, Alma, Abinadi, King Benjamin, Mormon, and Moroni, it is important for girls and women to have faithful, courageous, and heroic models of their own gender. Hopefully, Latter-day Saint women, like their Jewish counterparts, will awaken their imaginations to the possibilities that lie hidden in the record of Lehi and Sariah's people. It is interesting to contemplate whether the Nephites took with them not only the brass plates but some concept of midrash. Even though the earliest collections of midrashic literature as we know them date from the middle to late third century, as Steven D. Fraade, professor of Jewish history at Yale, speculates, "They contain interpretive traditions, whether attributed or anonymous, that might be significantly older."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, as Rabbis Michael Katz and Gershon Schwartz observe, "In one sense the process of midrash began the very first time the Torah was read."<sup>35</sup>

What midrashic possibilities does the Book of Mormon present? To answer that question, I have considered how both the sages and modern Jewish readers familiar with their rich tradition of mining the text and all that lies beneath and beyond it might begin approaching this New World scripture. I am not an expert on the Midrash, but I have immersed myself in enough midrashic writing to offer some tentative ideas and directions. To begin with, it would be enlightening to imaginatively reconstruct the lives of the first Book of Mormon family before they begin their perilous journey into the wilderness, across the Arabian Peninsula, and finally to the New World. We know that Lehi was a prominent man and that his family enjoyed both status and wealth

in Jerusalem. What more can we imagine that would add to the scant information that the first pages of the book provide? What, for example, are the “many great and marvelous things” Nephi says his father read in the book given to him by the Lord? (1 Ne. 1:14) What can our imaginations reconstruct of Lehi and Sariah’s family—especially of the sibling rivalry that is already fully developed by the time the family leaves Jerusalem? What explains Laman’s and Lemuel’s antagonism toward their younger brother? Was it akin to other biblical sibling rivalries—Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers? Certainly the older brothers have murderous intent toward Nephi similar to that which Joseph’s brothers have toward him. It is difficult to understand Laman’s and Lemuel’s spiritual schizophrenia because it is so extreme (and so predictable), and yet nothing determines or defines the family’s journey to the Promised Land more than their behavior, with the exception of Nephi’s steadfast spiritual leadership. What could have happened back in Jerusalem to have created two such malcontents? It is clear that they have their own welfare and family riches on their mind more than anything spiritual.

Sometimes the writers of midrash tell the story from another point of view. Since Nephi is the lone narrator of the odyssey from Jerusalem to the New World, we need to keep in mind that, as Wayne Booth and other textual critics argue, first-person narrators (I would include possibly even such narrators of sacred texts) can be unreliable, or at least limited, in the way they see and report events.<sup>36</sup> In some ways, in the beginning Nephi seems like the insufferably righteous younger brother. That’s certainly the way his two older brothers experience him. What if the story were told from the point of view of Laman or Lemuel or Zoram? What if it were told by Nephi’s wife? How would another view change the way we see the drama unfold? How do Ishmael and his family experience their journey away from Jerusalem, across the desert, and to the New World?

One of the things that marks the Hebrew Bible as great literature is its willingness to present both individuals and families with honesty, to position them within the full range of psychological and social complexity. Thus, we are shown characters who are not only courageous, faithful, and heroic, but also jealous, lustful, and murderous. It is in fact, such unflinching portrayals that allow us

to position ourselves within the real world of sacred literature. That is, if God can take a man like Abraham or a woman like Sarah who doubt that God can bless them with a child in their old age and through the refining process of faith and sacrifice make them among the most venerable figures of human history, through whom “all the kindreds of the earth [would] be blessed” (1 Ne. 22:9), then we may hope that we, too, can rise above our weaknesses and be transformed when God touches our souls. Regarding the Nephites, there are many other relational matters to consider. What, for example, was the family’s relationship with Ishmael and his family before the brothers returned to persuade them to join the exodus? Had the romantic relationships that blossomed in the desert already begun? Were the pairings determined by their parents? Was everyone content with his or her chosen or assigned partner? How did the wives and the children of the brothers get along? Imagine how wrenching the internecine conflicts must have been for the children of these families. The bonds that must have been forged among the brothers’ wives and children from Jerusalem to Bountiful and across the sea would have been particularly painful when the tribes split shortly after arriving in the New World.

And what of the episode of building the ship? It is such a breathtaking commandment for desert dwellers to suddenly be told that they are to build a ship and that they are actually going to board it and set sail on what must have seemed an endless sea to a far, unknown country. Who could blame some of the party for being incredulous? Who among us under similar circumstances might not have said, “Our brother is a fool, for he thinketh that he can build a ship; yea, and he also thinketh that he can cross these great waters?” (1 Ne. 17:17) The Midrash has commentary on such audacious enterprises undertaken by the people of the Bible, including Noah’s neighbors, who mocked him for building so fantastic a vessel as the ark. One legend tells how God, as with His turning stones into lights for the brother of Jared, “showed Noah with His finger how to make the ark,” and, according to another legend, also similar to Nephi, “Noah learned how to build [the ark] and mastered as well the various sciences, from the Sefer Razi’el (the book from which the angel Raziel taught Adam all the sciences), which had been brought to him by the angel Raphael.”<sup>37</sup> One story

about the building of the Tower of Babel reminds one of Laman and Lemuel: When one of the builders “fell and was killed, no one noticed. But if a brick fell and was broken, they sat down and wept.”<sup>38</sup>

The voyages of both the Jaredites and the Nephites offer wonderful opportunities to explore the dynamics of the first Book of Mormon immigrant families. As Steve Walker notes, the directions for the construction of the Jaredites’ sea-going vessels might have made for a particularly interesting and perilous voyage: “‘Behold, thou shalt make a hole in the top, and also in the bottom; and when thou shalt suffer for air thou shalt unstop the hole and receive air. And if it be so that the water come in upon thee, behold’—I’ll interrupt here to mention that they would have beheld with particularly rapt attention, as the ocean rushed in on them—‘ye shall stop the hole, that ye may not perish in the flood.’ In other words, Mahonri, if the plug lets in the water, consider the possibility that you may have opened the wrong end!”<sup>39</sup> Regarding another detail of the Jaredites’ long voyage to the Promised Land, Walker observes, “I smile, reading about the Jaredites coralling ‘swarms of bees’ in their boats.”<sup>40</sup> Walker’s finding humor in such episodes is also characteristic of some midrashim.

Claudia L. Bushman, like most readers of the Book of Mormon, yearns both for more narrative and more detail. Speaking of the abbreviated history kept by such scribes as Enos, Jarom, and Omni, she writes, “The years pass quickly in these little books. Fifty-five years after settlement, Jacob, the brother of Nephi born in the wilderness, begins his charge to engrave entries on the small plates. Jacob is told to hand his records down to his seed, from generation to generation. But, at the end of this period, his line has died out, and the records have moved to another lineage. Just twenty-six pages later, the space occupied by these five short books, we have traversed more than four hundred years.” Bushman, in the spirit of midrash, writes, “If I were Jacob and I were writing a short book, I would make it a narrative history of my time. But Jacob gives us very little narrative history. . . . More of an anthologist than an historian, Jacob seems to lack the drive to keep the record.”<sup>41</sup>

Out of what I consider a nearly inexhaustible source for a

Book of Mormon Midrash, let me suggest several especially fruitful lines of narrative to consider:

- The excursion to the New World by the Mulekites as revealed in Omni (1:12–14). These are people without a book and therefore with a fading historical memory until they meet and then join up with King Mosiah’s people. Coming, as both groups did, from the same location and historic period, it must have been fascinating for them to compare remembered stories of Jerusalem, the changing political scene following Lehi’s departure, their respective voyages to a new continent, and their experiences after arriving. Once they became assimilated, how much of their language, customs, and tribal memory did the Mulekites retain?
- The Mulekites inform Mosiah that they had discovered Coriantumr, the lone survivor of the Jaredite mutual annihilation, and that he had lived among them for “nine moons,” during which Coriantumr “spake a few words concerning his fathers. And his first parents came out from the tower [i.e., The Tower of Babel]” (Omni 1:20–22). How strange this meeting must have been and what stories Coriantumr must have told about the violent endgame of his civilization, his experience of wandering alone in such a wide world, and what it must have been like for him to have human companionship once more.
- In Alma 63 we are told of Hagoth, “an exceedingly curious man” who built ships and inspired a major northward Nephite migration, consisting of 5,400 men and their families. After reaching his destination, Hagoth returned to build more ships for additional emigrants and supplies and departed with a second group, including Alma’s son Corianton, but we are told they “were never heard of more.” The remaining Nephites concluded that these people may have “drowned in the depths of the sea” but offer no proof of this assumption. These people suggest additional material for midrashic composition.
- When the prophet Abinadi is pursued by the murderous agents of King Noah (Mosiah 11), we are told that he was gone “for the space of two years,” after which “he came among them in disguise, that they knew him not” and began to prophesy. What could we

imagine Abinadi doing during his two-year exile—surreptitiously moving about the country, trying on various disguises to see which was the most effective? If so, in his very first utterance, he blows his cover, telling those assembled, “Thus has the Lord commanded me, saying—Abinadi . . .” (Mosiah 12:1).<sup>42</sup>

- The story of the Nephites, like that of the Jaredites before them, ends darkly, with Moroni, the remaining righteous survivor, the last witness of his people’s barbarism. As he speaks of the destruction of his people and the death of his father, Mormon, his words are heart-breaking: “And I even remain alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people. But behold, they are gone, and I fulfil the commandment of my father. And whether they will slay me, I know not. . . . And whither I go it mattereth not. . . . And behold, I would write [more] also if I had room upon the plates, but I have not; and ore I have none, for I am alone. My father hath been slain in battle, and all my kinsfolk, and I have not friends nor whither to go; and how long the Lord will suffer that I may live I know not” (Mormon 8:3–6). Referring to Moroni’s lament in these verses, Reid Bankhead, my Book of Mormon teacher at BYU, called him “Sad Sack Moroni” (an allusion to a comic book character popular during mid-twentieth century<sup>43</sup>) but I think these verses call only for compassion: to be all alone for sixteen years, to be constantly in danger of falling into the hands of his enemies without a single person to befriend him must have been extremely trying for Moroni. It might be instructive for modern readers, faced by the threat of terrorist attacks, weapons of mass destruction, and the specter of unending war, to say nothing of existential loneliness, to identify with Moroni, to imagine his life during these long dangerous years of exile.

- There are, of course, many other stories, episodes, incidents, puzzling references, and provocative allusions that might awaken our spiritual imaginations were we to undertake the composition of what might constitute a Book of Mormon Midrash. In fact, every page of the Book of Mormon might call forth what one midrashic scholar has called “secular scripture.”<sup>44</sup>

For nearly two hundred years, Mormons have been yearning for the time when the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon would be opened to them. According to Joseph Smith’s contem-



poraries, that which is sealed could be as large as or larger than the translated portion.<sup>45</sup> Nephi described the untranslated text as containing “a revelation from God, from the beginning of the world to the end thereof” (2 Ne. 27:7). From the time the Book of Mormon was first published, there has been considerable speculation about when and under what conditions the remainder of the Jaredite and Nephite records would become available. As individual readers, we may not have control or influence over the timing of new revelations or the unfolding of old revelations, but we do have influence and control over how we might imaginatively engage with the record we do have. That is, while we may not have access to the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon, using our spiritual imaginations, we could unseal more of the possibilities of the portion we do have.

I recognize that what I propose might be seen as abrogating to individual members that which some would say should be reserved for prophets or other ecclesiastical leaders, but in reality it is simply a call to extend and deepen the activity in which many Latter-day Saints are already engaged—expounding, expanding, and interpreting scripture, imaginatively stretching the boundaries of sacred texts to make them more relevant to the challenges of our everyday lives.

Speakers in general conference as well as in many sacrament meetings participate in something akin to midrash. That is, Mormons believe in what might be called the democratization of scriptural interpretation—not that scripture might mean anything or that it means everything, but that each person is encouraged to engage with scripture with his or her heart, mind, and even imagination. As long as such engagements do not challenge doctrine (as I believe the above imaginative reading of Peter walking on the water does not), they might be seen as part of our spiritual work. If the purpose of reading scripture is to understand how we might be better disciples, then anything that furthers that objective should be deemed acceptable. In other words, the Holy Ghost might enlighten our imaginations as much as our minds were we to be open to that possibility.

Perhaps the judgment of Mormon midrashic writing could be measured against at least some of Lowell Bennion’s criteria for judging interpretations of scripture. As Philip L. Barlow summa-

rizes, “Bennion gauges a scriptural interpretation as worthy if it: (1) is consistent with gospel fundamentals . . . , (2) is confirmed by the promptings of the Holy Spirit, (3) appeals to thoughtful ethical judgment, (4) has won wide agreement among informed and rational persons of good will, (5) allows for the human as well as the divine in revelation, and (6) is primarily concerned with scripture’s religious intent.”<sup>46</sup>

It could be, as the rabbis themselves argued consistently, that such imaginative encounters with sacred literature are what God intends. As Rabbi Sandy Sasso proclaims, “God delights in the human imagination.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, rather than God wanting our attention focused on fixed, immutable texts, rather than our being satisfied solely with literal interpretations, rather than our seeing the divine-human story as closed, He has been inviting us all along to open our hearts and minds to their imaginative possibilities, as—according to the rabbis’ bold suggestion—they are also continually open to God’s heart and mind. That is, the rabbis saw even God as continuing to read and wrestle with His own scriptures: “The Talmud says that God himself studies the Bible every day. It says God is sitting in the bet midrash, the study house, wearing a round black cap and holding an open Bible, arguing and wrestling [with] his own text right along with learned rabbis throughout the ages.”<sup>48</sup>

While we may tend to be suspicious of the imagination, to think of imaginative impulses as “vain,” it is important to recognize that everything, including the creation of the world itself, was or first had to be imagined. As humanistic scholar Ihab Hassan states, “Perhaps the imagination is the true teleological organ in our evolution, directing all change.”<sup>49</sup> I believe that the Book of Mormon awaits a new generation of bold, thoughtful, and imaginative readers, those who, to borrow a phrase from B. H. Roberts, “will not be content with merely repeating some of [the Book of Mormon’s] truths, but will develop its truths; and enlarge it by that development.” Roberts calls not only for more dedicated discipleship but what I like to think of as more imaginative discipleship:

Not half—not one-hundredth part—not a thousandth part of that which Joseph Smith revealed to the Church has yet been unfolded,

either to the Church or to the world. The work of the expounder has scarcely begun. The Prophet planted by teaching the germ-truths of the great dispensation of the fullness of times. The watering and the weeding is going on, and God is giving the increase, and will give it more abundantly in the future as more intelligent discipleship shall obtain. The disciples of "Mormonism," growing discontented with the necessarily primitive methods which have hitherto prevailed in sustaining the doctrine, will yet take profounder and broader views of the great doctrines committed to the Church; and, departing from mere repetition, will cast them in new formulas; cooperating in the works of the Spirit, until they help to give to the truths received a more forceful expression and carry it beyond the earlier and cruder stages of its development.<sup>50</sup>

I contend that one of the ways in which Latter-day Saints can cooperate in works of the spirit is to "cast [Restoration scriptures] in new formulas," including the creation of a body of midrashic readings of these sacred texts. As pointed out earlier, Rabbi Sandy Sasso speaks of the rabbis' unfolding of Torah as "continuing revelation,"<sup>51</sup> a concept central to Mormon experience. Thus, Latter-day Saints should be open to continuing imaginative revelation through both ancient and modern scriptures. As the rabbis said of their study of Torah, "Turn it and turn it again, for everything is contained therein."<sup>52</sup>

#### Notes

1. Jacob Neusner, *The Midrash: An Introduction* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1994), xi.
2. Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *God's Echo: Exploring Scripture with Midrash* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2007), 27.
3. Robert A. Rees, "Toward a Feminist Mormon Midrash," *Sunstone* (forthcoming).
4. For clarification, "Midrash" (capitalized) refers to the library or collection of midrashic writings, whereas "midrash" (lower case) refers to an individual midrashic composition. It is important to distinguish between the two types or categories of midrashim—Halakhic or Tannaitic midrashim, which focus on the laws derived from scripture, and Aggadic midrashim, which focus on edification derived from imaginative readings of scriptural text. The former is a much more legalistic approach and focuses on extremely close readings of the Torah to ascertain the minute and esoteric aspects of the law. In the second, "the historical themes of the Scriptures are midrashically interpreted in such a way that the entire story of Yisrael becomes a continuous revelation of G-d's love

and justice.” “What Is Midrash?” <http://www.headcoverings-by-devorah.com/WhatIsMidrash.htm> (accessed October 17, 2009). An example of a Halakhic midrash is seen in the attempt to “discover the law that the Shabbat can be profaned in order to save life (e.g., where the doctors say that hot food must be served to a dangerously sick person and no hot food is available . . . so one is allowed to cook) derives this from the verse: ‘You shall keep My decrees and My laws, which man shall carry out and by which he shall live—I am Hashem’ (VaYikra 18:5). Since the verse states ‘shall live,’ it is implied that where death may result from the observance of the laws, the laws may be set aside.” An example of an Aggadic midrash is “the comment on the verse: ‘G-d did not lead them by way of the land of the Pelishtim, . . .’ (Shemot 13:17), that is, His providence over the Yisralim in the Wilderness was not through natural process (‘the way of the land’). In natural order bread comes from the ground and water from the sky, whereas in the Wilderness the Manna came from heaven and water from the flinty rock” (ibid.).

5. David C. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth-Century Hebrew Writers* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 1.

6. Naomi M. Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash: A Sourcebook* (London: Jason Aronson, 1998), xxvii, xxix.

7. Sasso, *God's Echo*, 30, 69–70.

8. Leila Leah Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press 1994), xxi, 185.

9. Judith M. Kunst, *The Burning Word: A Christian Encounter with Jewish Midrash* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2006), 5, 76 .

10. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in Joel Porte, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 59.

11. Neusner, *The Midrash*, x–xi.

12. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 242.

13. Sasso, *God's Echo*, 11.

14. Based on internal evidence and historic events, scholars have argued that the poetic version in Judges 5, known as “The Song of Deborah,” was composed much earlier than the simpler prose version in Judges 4. However, Gregory T. K. Wong, “Song of Deborah as Polemic,” *Biblica* 88 (2007): 20, argues that a “more likely” scenario is that “both prose and poetic accounts were based on essentially the same source material or had similar knowledge of the same historical event, but that

each author had independently chosen to include different details to fit his specific rhetorical goal.”

15. See K. L. Younger Jr., “Heads,! Tails! Or the Whole Coin?! Contextual Method and Intertextual Analysis: Judges 4 and 5,” in K. L. Younger Jr., W. W. Hallo, and B. F. Batto, eds., *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective*, in Vol. 4 in *SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 109–35.

16. According to Danna Nolan Fewell, the accurate translation of the Hebrew *raqaq* is not “temple,” but rather “parted lips,” suggesting that her act is more violent, for she “drives a tent peg through his mouth . . . severing his spinal column, leaving him to die a convulsive death.” “Judges” in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Women’s Bible Commentary: Expanded Edition, with Apocrypha* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster Knox Press, 1998), 75.

17. ‘*Aqedath Yishaq*, from the Midrash Ben Ish Hai, [www.midrash.org/halakha/aqedah.html](http://www.midrash.org/halakha/aqedah.html) (accessed August 19, 2009).

18. *Parshat Va’yera* [Weekly Torah], prepared by Rabbi Charles Sheer, [http://www.hillel.org/jewish/archives/bereshit/vayera/2002\\_vayera.htm](http://www.hillel.org/jewish/archives/bereshit/vayera/2002_vayera.htm) (accessed August 19, 2009).

19. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash*, 2.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. Kunst, *The Burning Word*, 108–9.

23. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash*, 3.

24. Kunst, *The Burning Word*, 86.

25. *Ibid.*, 128.

26. Amos Oz, quoted in Sasso, *God’s Echo*, 17.

27. Sasso, *God’s Echo*, 17.

28. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (New York: University of Oxford Press, 2010), 69. Hardy’s *The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), uses such headings as “The Lehighites in the Last Days (Midrash on Isaiah 29:3–5)” (1 Ne. 26).

29. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Book of Mormon Is the Word of God,” *Ensign*, May 1975, 63.

30. Jill Hammer, *Sisters at Sinai: New Tales of Biblical Women* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xiii.

31. See, for example, Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women’s Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) and Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

32. Rees, “Toward a Feminist Mormon Midrash.”

33. See John W. Welch, comp., "Charting the Book of Mormon," <http://byustudies.byu.edu/januarybomcharts/charts/108.html> (accessed June 21, 2009). See also J. Gregory Welch and John W. Welch, *Charting the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS/Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 1999).

34. Steven D. Fraade, "Rabbinic Midrash and Ancient Jewish Biblical Interpretation," *Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, edited by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 99.

35. Michael Katz and Gershon Schwartz, *Searching for Meaning in Midrash* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 9.

36. Wayne C. Booth, "Telling as Showing: Dramatized Narrators, Reliable and Unreliable," in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), chap. 8. See also "The Unreliable Narrator," Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unreliable\\_narrator](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unreliable_narrator) (accessed September 27, 2010).

37. "Noah in Rabbinic Literature," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noah\\_in\\_rabbinic\\_literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noah_in_rabbinic_literature) (accessed January 15, 2009).

38. Batnativ HaKarmi, "Hubris, Language, and Oppression: Recreating Babel in Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* and the Midrash," [http://130.102.44.245/journals/partial\\_answers/v007/7.1.hakarmi.pdf](http://130.102.44.245/journals/partial_answers/v007/7.1.hakarmi.pdf) (accessed October 4, 2010).

39. Steve Walker, "Last Words: 4 Nephi-Moroni," in *The Reader's Book of Mormon*, edited by Robert A. Rees and Eugene England, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008), 7:xviii.

40. Ibid.

41. Claudia L. Bushman, "Big Lessons from Little Books: (2 Nephi 5 through the Words of Mormon)," *The Reader's Book of Mormon*, edited by Robert A. Rees and Eugene England, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008), 2:vii–viii.

42. I cite this as an example in my "Irony in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 26.

43. See <http://www.sadsack.net/> (accessed September 30, 2010).

44. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash*, 15.

45. Alexander L. Baugh, "Sealed Portion of the Gold Plates," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, edited by Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 707.

46. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 203–4.

47. Sasso, *God's Echo*, 14.

48. Kunst, *The Burning Word*, 4.

49. Ihab Hassan, "Fiction and Future: An Extravaganza for Voice and Tape," in Ihab Hassan, ed., *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 179.

50. B. H. Roberts, Letter dated June 1, 1906, in "Book of Mormon Translation: Interesting Correspondence on the Subject of the Manual Theory," *Improvement Era* 9 (1906): 712ff.

51. Sasso, *God's Echo*, 11.

52. Kunst, *The Burning Word*, 58.