THE SIDNEY SPERRY/HEBER SNELL DEBATES: CRITICAL BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND MORMON TRADITION

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In 2018, the Sunday School instructor of my Mormon congregation was assigned to teach the stories about Lot found in Genesis 19. The teacher confessed that he was very uncomfortable discussing these narratives. Instead, he chose to review several recent General Conference addresses. Not long after, another teacher was leading a discussion on the book of Numbers. One attendee noted that the passages portrayed a morally suspect deity,[1] inconsistent with the God of Mormon teaching.

Discomfort with conflicts between Old Testament teachings and contemporary beliefs has plagued Christians, including Mormons, from their respective beginnings.[2] Whether and how to approach such problems while best promoting faith has occasioned considerable debate. Some LDS Church leaders have favored attempts to resolve inconsistencies while others have advocated shielding their adherents

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1. For example, see Numbers 11, 16, and 25.

2. These difficulties resulted in various solutions in early Christian factions. For example, Marcion of Sinope (d. c. 160 CE) rejected the Old Testament, the Christian Gnostics distinguished between the God of Moses and the God of Jesus, and early mainline Christians resorted to selective quotations and allegorical hermeneutics. See Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young, eds. *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Origins to Constantine* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 195–201, 249–51.

from controversies. The choice of the latter in recent decades has resulted in a generation of Mormons protected from difficult issues in biblical interpretation. Conversely, during the early twentieth century, Church leaders encouraged the production of educational materials that addressed scriptural problems. These were initially written by faithful scholars who had been formally educated in non-biblical fields. This effort was significantly advanced during the 1930s and 1940s when professionally trained biblical scholars became available.[3] The two most prominent scholars to come out of this period were Sidney Sperry (1895–1977) and Heber Snell (1899–1974).

Sperry and Snell were the first active Mormon scholars to obtain PhDs in biblical studies, both from the University of Chicago in 1931 and 1940, respectively.[4] Both were highly respected college instructors in the Church Educational System throughout most of their careers. Church leaders requested both to author an Old Testament textbook for use in the Church's institutes of higher education, works intended to exemplify the best scholarship adapted to a Mormon context.[5] Yet, Sperry and Snell disagreed over how such a project would be best accomplished. Their disputes exposed many important questions and

3. For a list of Mormons obtaining advanced degrees in religious studies during the period see Thomas W. Simpson, *American Universities and the Birth of Modern Mormonism, 1867–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 162–64.

4. Sperry obtained a master of arts degree (1926) from the Divinity School with the thesis "The Text of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon" and a PhD (1931) from the Oriental Language and Literature Department with the dissertation "The Scholia of Bar Hebraeus to the Books of Kings." Snell worked intermittently on his PhD, starting in 1932 and completing it in 1940 at the Divinity School with the dissertation "The Background and Study of the Teaching-of-Jesus Literature in America."

5. The resulting works were Sidney B. Sperry, *The Spirit of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, 1940); Heber Cyrus Snell, *Ancient Israel: Its Story and Meaning, A Brief History for Seminaries, Colleges, and for the General Reader* (Salt Lake City: Stevens & Wallis, Inc., 1948).

methodological issues that needed addressing for such a task to suc-
ceed. In this study, we will examine some of the disputes that Sperry
and Snell chose to address, their suggested approaches, and how these
fared. I argue that, although presenting significant challenges, the work
of Sperry and Snell show us that the integration of critical biblical schol-
arship and Mormon tradition is possible and helpful, at least for some
disputes, and that their pioneering efforts are worth continuing.

Mormons and Critical Biblical Scholarship in the Early Twentieth Century

In the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, traditional
Christian biblical interpretations were increasingly being challenged by
liberal biblical scholars employing the modernist techniques of "higher
criticism." As Harvard historian William R. Hutchison has noted, these
ideas had infiltrated virtually all American denominations and "had
attained a voice equal to those of the older and newer conservatisms
that opposed it."[6] The liberal biblical literary critics were principally
concerned with (1) authorship, date, and place of composition, (2) lit-
erary form, and (3) historical value.[7] As such, a primary aim was to
discover the original meaning of the text, or, in other words, the literal
meaning in historical context. As one scholar from the early twentieth
century explained, such studies required the use of "scientific meth-
ods . . . without regard to authority of any kind."[8]

　　Disputes between conservative and liberal biblical scholars were
often bitter and included personal attacks. Regarding the latter, New

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6. William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 1992), 113.

7. Andrew C. Zenos, *The Elements of the Higher Criticism* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1895), 14–46.

8. Henry S. Nash, *The History of the Higher Criticism of the New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1906), 101, 47.

York liberal preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick pointed out in a famous 1922 sermon that liberal and conservative theologians tend to view each other in unflattering stereotyped ways. Conservatives accuse liberal thinkers of being "reckless radicals gifted with intellectual ingenuity but lacking spiritual depth" whereas liberals characterize conservatives as "illiberal and intolerant."[9] As we will see, some liberal and conservative Mormon scholars were also not above leveling such assaults on the character of their opponents.

At first, Mormon leaders found themselves challenged by the liberal biblical innovations.[10] Early in the twentieth century, there were high-profile sanctions and defections, most visibly three professors who were dismissed from Brigham Young Academy in 1911.[11] On one hand, this Mormon "modernism controversy" resulted in significant student support for the dismissed professors,[12] making it more difficult for Church leaders to completely reject the new biblical scholarship. On the other hand, Church leaders retained serious concern that this kind of scholarship eroded the faith of the young. As apostle James E. Talmage observed in 1914: "higher critics of the scriptures . . . [who] profess doubt as to the truth and plain meaning of the Holy Scriptures" were having "pernicious" effects on young Mormons, who "are impressed

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9. Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" *Christian Work* 102 (June 10, 1922): 716–22.

10. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford, 2013), 112–61; Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1986), 171–79.

11. For differing perspectives on the controversy see Ralph V. Chamberlin, *Life and Philosophy of W. H. Chamberlin* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1925), 137–60; Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, vol. 1 (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 412–33; and Simpson, *Modern Mormonism*, 95–97.

12. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 172.

by those who instruct them."[13] For Church leaders like Talmage, it was evident that a clearer definition of boundaries for the Church's religion instructors was needed.

In response to the 1911 controversy at Brigham Young Academy, Church president Joseph F. Smith emphasized that the professors were dismissed not because they taught the new ideas but because they gave them inappropriate priority.[14] He attempted to create a middle position, acknowledging that "the higher criticism" might reveal "many truths."[15] In so doing, Smith laid the groundwork for a moderate approach that allowed toleration of the findings of critical biblical scholars as long as they did not challenge core Mormon doctrines. Smith's policy of moderation was soon reflected in official Church teaching manuals.[16] But

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13. Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Apr. 1914 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semiannual), 94–95.

14. Joseph F. Smith, "Theory and Divine Revelation," *Improvement Era* 14, no. 6 (Apr. 1911): 548–51.

15. Joseph F. Smith, "Philosophy and the Church Schools," *Juvenile Instructor* 46, no. 4 (Apr. 1911): 209; and "Theory and Divine Revelation," 548.

16. Examples include James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission According to Holy Scriptures both Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1915) and Joseph M. Tanner, *Old Testament Studies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1917). While these authors were clearly attempting to counter the liberal arguments, they also acknowledged some of the critics' conclusions. For example, Talmage conceded the overall similarity of and contradictions among the first three Gospels and admitted that the parables in Matthew 13 were probably not all uttered at the same time. Likewise, Tanner emphasized the message and deemphasized the historical questions regarding the book of Jonah and argued favorably for an exilic author of Isaiah 40–66. For a discussion of Talmage's work as a response to liberal Bible scholarship see Clyde D. Ford, "Modernism and Mormonism: James E. Talmage's *Jesus the Christ* and Early Twentieth-Century Mormon Responses to Biblical Criticism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 96–120.

none of the Mormon scholars of this era had the mastery afforded by formal training in biblical scholarship.

The reasons for the subsequent integration of formally trained biblical scholars into the Church Educational System are complex and multifactorial. Historian Leonard Arrington observed that during the 1920s, "Scientists were taking over the study and interpretation of the Bible by means of the 'Higher Criticism.'"[17] This and other issues were challenging the traditional faith of the increasing number of young Mormons undergoing higher education. To address the problem, some Church leaders concluded that they needed more sophisticated college-level religious instruction in conjunction with the college curriculum. They organized the first Institute of Religion at the University of Idaho in 1926. Its first director, J. Wyley Sessions, wanted to include courses on "religious philosophy and Bible history" for college credit and successfully negotiated this with the university administration on the conditions that (1) the instructors had at least a master's degree and qualified for faculty appointments and (2) no course content could be "sectarian in religion or partisan in politics."[18] College credit was continuing at some institute programs twenty-five years later,[19] suggesting the ongoing significance of having trained teachers of institute classes while Sperry and Snell were doing their work.

Historian Casey Paul Griffiths has suggested other possible reasons underlying the impulse to upgrade the scholarly credentials of Church educators. One was the desire of Church leaders to pattern the new Mormon secondary school seminaries after the University of Idaho model. Another may have arisen from Church educators themselves, as

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17. Leonard J. Arrington, "The Founding of the L.D.S. Institutes of Religion," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1967): 139.

18. J. Wyley Sessions, "The Latter-day Saint Institutes," *Improvement Era* 38, no. 7 (July 1935): 412.

19. Albert L. Zobell Jr., "Progress in Church Institutes of Religion," *Improvement Era* 53, no. 11 (Nov. 1950): 882.

evidenced by their enthusiastic responses following exposure to critical biblical scholarship. In the mid-1920s, Sperry and Snell sought outside formal education in biblical studies at the University of Chicago and the Pacific School of Religion, respectively. Both conveyed their new knowledge to their peers in the Church Educational System, receiving rave reviews. These were reinforced after University of Chicago New Testament scholar Edgar J. Goodspeed visited the educators' annual Aspen Grove summer school in 1930.[20] Additionally, Church leaders noted that Sperry did not seem to suffer any negative consequences following his exposure to liberal ideas.[21] Thus resulted what Griffiths has dubbed "the Chicago experiment," in which, beginning in 1930, several Church religious educators were encouraged to seek formal education at the University of Chicago Divinity School. These students returned to the Church Educational System and introduced innovations that were then disseminated in Church-sponsored manuals,[22] in educational sessions for other Church instructors, and in the classroom. Yet Church leaders at the highest level remained split throughout this decade on some of the key issues in modernism. In 1934, Church president Heber J. Grant chose Joshua Reuben Clark Jr. as first counselor and David O.

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20. Casey Paul Griffiths, "The Chicago Experiment: Finding the Voice and Charting the Course of Religious Education in the Church," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2010): 93–95. See also Russel B. Swensen, "Mormons at the University of Chicago Divinity School: A Personal Reminiscence," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1972), 37–47.

21. Swensen, "Mormons at the University of Chicago Divinity School," 99.

22. Examples include Russel B. Swensen, *New Testament Literature: A Study For College Students* (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, 1940); Daryl Chase, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, 1944); and Russel B. Swensen's three-year Gospel Doctrine New Testament study courses: *The Synoptic Gospels* (1945), *The Gospel of John* (1946), *The New Testament: The Acts and the Epistles* (1947), all published by the Deseret Sunday School Union out of Salt Lake City.

McKay as second in the First Presidency. McKay favored a moderate approach, while Clark opposed liberal biblical scholarship.[23]

In 1938, Clark instructed Church educators that "You are not to teach the philosophes of the world. . . .Your sole field is the gospel."[24] Ecclesiastical leaders who supported Clark's positions became known as "Clark men," most prominently senior apostle Joseph Fielding Smith Jr. Those favoring McKay's stance were "McKay men."[25] In 1940, Grant suffered a dominant hemisphere stroke, leaving him progressively disabled until his death in 1945. During this time, four new apostles were chosen, all Clark men, presumably due to Clark's influence. They would go on to figure prominently in the shift of Mormonism in a fundamentalist direction in the latter twentieth century, but that is another story.[26]

As illustrated by these examples, there was a spectrum of opinions among Church leadership regarding biblical criticism during the 1920s and 1930s and afterward. Mormon philosopher Sterling McMurrin identified three categories: "unbelievers" who prioritize biblical criticism, "believers . . . who attempt a reconciliation," and "believers . . . who reject knowledge and science and affirm faith and the revelation

23. D. Michael Quinn, *J. Reuben Clark: The Church Years* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1983), 175–79.

24. J. Reuben Clark Jr., "The Charted Course of the Church in Education" (address to seminary and institute of religion leaders at the Brigham Young University summer school, Aspen Grove, Utah, Aug. 8, 1938).

25. For a list of the most prominent leaders on each side see Quinn, *J. Reuben Clark*, 300. McKay's dislike for Clark's and Joseph Fielding Smith's positions was manifest when he became Church president in 1951. He "demoted" Clark to Second Counselor in the First Presidency and declined to support Smith's magnum opus attack on liberal biblical criticism *Man, His Origin and Destiny* (1954). See Gregory A. Prince and William Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 2005), 45–47.

26. See Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

only."[27] McMurrin typified the first group, while Clark and Joseph Fielding Smith characterized the last. However, the ground between these two extremes was quite large. I suggest that Sperry and Snell represented the conservative- and liberal-leaning spectrums, respectively, of the middle group. By the 1960s, McMurrin noted: "For many years, Professors Snell and Sperry have been the undisputed leaders of the main wings of Bible scholarship in the LDS Church."[28] Not surprisingly, Sperry had the more amicable relationship with Smith and Snell with McMurrin.[29]

Sidney Sperry

By whatever combination of nature and nurture, Sperry came to his higher education with an inclination toward religious conservatism. In 1926, he received a master's degree in Old Testament from the University of Chicago Divinity School with the thesis "The Text of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon." But Sperry was not entirely comfortable with the liberal emphasis of the Divinity School instructors.[30] In 1931 he received a PhD from the Department of Oriental Languages and Literature. Sperry then participated in the American Schools of Oriental Research Jerusalem School in 1931 and 1932, gaining expertise in Palestinian archeology.

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27. Sterling M. McMurrin, *Lectures on Religion and Culture* (Salt Lake City: Tanner Humanities Center, 2004), 67.

28. Sterling M. McMurrin, "Letter to the Editor," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2, no. 3 (Fall 1967): 10–11.

29. See the multiple friendly and mutually respectful correspondences between Smith and Sperry and McMurrin and Snell in Sidney B. Sperry papers in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter Sperry papers), and Heber Snell papers in the Utah State University Library, Logan, Utah (hereafter Snell papers).

30. Snell noted Sperry's "bias against University of Chicago scholars." Snell to Sperry, Sept. 20, 1949, Snell papers.

Sperry quickly became the Church's most respected formally educated Old Testament scholar, and his lectures on the Old Testament were enthusiastically received by his Church Educational System peers.[31] Franklin L. West, the Commissioner of Church Education (1936–1953), requested that Sperry write a text for the study of the Old Testament.[32] His finished work, *The Spirit of the Old Testament*, was published by the Church in 1940. The book reflected both a sympathy for Mormon tradition, including quotations from Mormon scripture, and a high level of scholarship. Sperry described his methodology: "Where questions of Biblical criticism have been dealt with, conservative views have generally been adopted."[33] Sperry's book was used by instructors in the Church Educational System for many years, including by Snell.[34] In 1970, at the urging of "friends and colleagues," Sperry published a second, expanded edition of his book.[35] Sperry's expertise in the Old Testament was also utilized in the composition of Church manuals for Sunday worship.[36] Sperry taught at Brigham Young University until his mid-seventies, retiring in 1971.

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31. Griffiths, "Chicago Experiment," 93–94. Sperry was consulted both by Church leaders and other Church scholars regarding issues related to ancient languages, scriptural interpretation, and other scholarly questions. For examples, see Sperry to J. Reuben Clark Jr., Oct. 22, 1948; Snell to Sperry, Feb. 9, 1939; Sperry to Snell, Feb. 10, 1939, Sperry papers.

32. Sperry noted a request from West for "lessons of the Old Testament" in early 1939. See Sperry to H. Grant Vest, January 31, 1939, Sperry papers.

33. Sperry, *Spirit of the Old Testament*, preface.

34. Snell to Sperry, Sept. 20, 1949, Snell papers.

35. Sidney B. Sperry, *The Spirit of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), reissued by Deseret Book in 1980.

36. For example, Sperry's influence is evident in the text and non-Mormon scholarly references in the 1944 Gospel Doctrine Sunday School manual, "*Feed my Sheep*": *The Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Desert Sunday School Union, 1943). See also the 1966 Gospel Doctrine course manual: Sidney B. Sperry, *The Old Testament Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1965).

Heber Snell

Snell came to his higher education comfortable within a liberal environment. He had been a student of William Chamberlin, one of the professors who came under criticism in the 1911 controversy at Brigham Young Academy. James M. McLachlan has termed Chamberlin "Mormonism's first professionally trained philosopher and theologian."[37] Snell adopted Chamberlin's linear progressive development view of Old Testament theological beliefs, which beliefs, Chamberlin felt, gradually matured under intermittent divine interventions.[38] Snell received his PhD in New Testament studies in 1941 under the supervision of University of Chicago historian and liberal New Testament scholar Shirley Jackson Case. Under Case's sociohistorical method, a linear progressive view of Christian history was postulated in which early Christians progressed in their knowledge and understanding in stages.[39] Snell likely had some sympathies for this view, although he probably would have amended Case's model with a greater degree of divine guidance.

While Snell was writing a manual for Church instruction in the New Testament and early Christian history, Franklin West requested

37. James M. McLachlan, "W. H. Chamberlin and the Quest for a Mormon Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 151–68; see also Ephraim E. Ericksen, "William H. Chamberlin: Pioneer Mormon Philosopher," *Western Humanities Review* 8, no. 4 (Autumn 1954): 275–85.

38. Chamberlin taught that "the ideas of God achieved by the people of Israel had their genesis in the lives of leaders of great insight [i.e., Old Testament prophets] who appeared among them at critical times and taught them ever newer and better ideas of God. These ideas they committed to writing, and the literature known as the Old Testament was the result." See W. H. Chamberlin, *The Study of Philosophy: An Outline* (Salt Lake City, 1919), 39.

39. For Case, "Christianity was understood as the product of the long continuous social history of believers working out their beliefs." See William J. Hynes, *Shirley Jackson Case and the Chicago School: The Socio-Historical Method* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981), ix–x.

that he produce a text for Old Testament study.[40] This may seem surprising since Snell was a New Testament scholar, and Sperry had already published a textbook. Several factors may have contributed to the request for another manual. First, as noted above, a few non-Church colleges were still granting college credit for some institute courses. College certification would require the use of a textbook that reflected adequate scholarship and, unlike Sperry's, that lacked denominational dogma.[41] Second, West was impressed with Snell's approaches to the Old Testament problems, which Snell had enumerated in enthusiastically received presentations to Mormon educators.[42] Snell had also delivered a popular series of lectures on the Bible, which West felt were "very fine." West expressed admiration for Snell's scholarship.[43] In addition, West was intrigued by Snell's emphasis on Old Testament history

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40. "Heber C. Snell Ph.D., Logan, Utah: Interviews conducted by Frederick S. Buchanan, Lewis Max Rogers, and Dale C. LeCheminant," 8, Marriott Library Special Collections Department, University of Utah, available at https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=790469. Snell noted that he was understandably surprised by the request.

41. Snell summarized his understanding of this objective: "I intended my book for use, primarily, as a text in colleges and seminaries on the college level, both within and outside the borders of the Church." Consistent with this goal, Snell solicited feedback from senior non-Mormon Old Testament scholar William A. Irwin, Snell's Hebrew and Old Testament professor at Chicago, who considered his work "conservative." Snell to the Executive Committee of the Church Board of Education, Mar. 8, 1949, Snell papers; Irwin to Snell, July 19, 1949, Snell papers.

42. Griffiths, "Chicago Experiment," 93–94. An example is Heber C. Snell, "Criteria for Interpreting the Old Testament to College Youth," in *Through the Years: Occasional Writings of Heber C. Snell* (Logan: Utah State University, 1969), 95–117.

43. West to Snell, May 7, 1938, Snell papers; McMurrin to Snell, Oct. 31, 1940, Snell papers.

and his progressive idealistic approach.[44] Referring to one purpose for his book, Snell noted that "It is worth everything to our youth, in these days of confusion, to accept the view that God was, and is, vitally at work in history."[45] Thus, Snell's task was more difficult than Sperry's; Snell was to write a text that would be compatible with Mormon teaching, help Mormon college-age young adults resolve intellectual and theological problems, and be acceptable to secular college administrators. Conflicts among these goals would prove problematic.

Despite his support of Snell's work, West ultimately declined to publish the book with the Church because, as Richard Sherlock has pointed out, "he knew that some of his superiors would not approve" of Snell's scholarship.[46] West's primary concern was Joseph Fielding Smith. Smith, a formidable conservative adversary, chaired the executive committee of the Church Board of Education and, more importantly, the Church Publications Committee, which approved "all literature of a religious nature to be used in texts for our schools, seminaries, and auxiliaries.[47] A key to the success of any work intended for Church

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44. West suggested a discussion of the Mormon "philosophy of history" during a meeting of Mormon college institute teachers in the spring of 1948 and invited Snell to contribute. West was interested in discussion concerning "what is the soundest and wisest philosophy of Church history? How, and to what extent is God operating in the affairs of men, not particularly as individuals, but in larger social units, such as national and international relationships, and in political history in general." See West to Snell, Mar. 19, 1948, Snell papers.

45. Snell to Joseph F. Merrill, Mar. 26, 1949, Snell papers.

46. Richard Sherlock, "Faith and History: The Snell Controversy," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 29.

47. Francis M. Gibbons, *Joseph Fielding Smith: Gospel Scholar, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 356–67. The members of the executive committee are listed in a memo, Oct. 1947, Snell papers.

education was avoiding the opposition of Smith.[48] We will encounter some examples of Smith's considerable influence below.

Snell privately published the resulting book, *Ancient Israel: Its Story and Meaning*, in 1948. West purchased 121 copies for the institute and seminary libraries as a reference work, where many copies remained several years later.[49] The book received positive reviews in non-Mormon venues and was used by Snell and a few other Mormon and non-Mormon instructors in institute and college courses, demonstrating its intended versatility.[50]

West was right not to try to get the book past Joseph Fielding Smith. After the book was published, Smith objected to Snell's acceptance of biblical historical criticism, the lack of references to Mormon biblical proof texts, and Snell's progressive view of history. Some other Church leaders disagreed. Levi Edgar Young characterized the book as "a fine piece of work" and John Widtsoe as doing "very well in retaining the Latter-day Saint interpretation of the Old Testament."[51] Former Commissioner of Church Education and apostle Joseph F. Merrill

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48. Smith's defense of traditional Mormonism, as he interpreted it, was not limited to Snell's work. Smith disapproved of the potential contributions of any Mormon biblical scholar who tried to introduce liberal innovations contrary to Mormon belief and Church leaders' policies into Church curriculum. For example, see the extensive criticisms of New Testament scholar Russel B. Swensen's manuscripts for the Gospel Doctrine courses *The Significance of the New Testament* and *The Gospel of John*. See The Publication Committee (Smith was chair) to the Deseret Sunday School Union Board, Sept. 29, 1944 and Sept. 7, 1945, Sperry papers. Swensen seemed to understand better than Snell the practical value of not pushing too hard against Smith.

49. West to Snell, Oct. 27, 1948, Snell papers; Ernest L. Wilkinson to Snell, July 27, 1953, Snell papers.

50. Snell, "Interviews," 5.

51. Levi Edgar Young to Snell, Jan. 8, 1949 and June 21, 1949, Snell papers; Widtsoe to Snell, Mar. 29, 1949, Snell papers.

characterized the work as "scholarly" and "conservative," aptly suited for institute "credit courses."[52] Yet, Smith's influence proved decisive. Smith ultimately banned Snell's book for use in Mormon institute courses and crystalized his anti-liberal views, specifically unfavorably quoting Snell's book, in his *Man, His Origin and Destiny* (1954).[53] Snell appealed to Church presidents George Albert Smith and David O. McKay to reverse Smith's ban on his book with no resolution.[54] Despite continued vigor and desire to remain in his teaching position,[55] Snell's contract was not renewed in 1950,[56] and he retired at the age of sixty-seven. Snell's book was published in a revised second edition in 1957 and reprinted by the University of Utah Press in 1963.

Although Snell's text was officially rejected, some of his approaches lived on through West, who himself published a textbook for Old Testament study in Mormon secondary school seminaries in 1950.[57] Apparently designed for a high school accredited seminary course, West's text was also devoid of Mormon teachings, presented in a historical format, and even contained a final chapter entitled "God in History."

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52. Merrill to Snell, Mar. 29, 1949, Snell papers.

53. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Man, His Origin and Destiny* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 492–94.

54. Widtsoe to Snell, Mar. 29, 1949, Snell papers; Joseph F. Merrill to Snell, Mar. 29, 1949, Snell papers; Snell to George Albert Smith, May 24, 1950, Snell papers; Smith to Snell, July 18, 1950, Snell papers; McKay to Snell; Mar. 17, 1952, Snell papers.

55. Snell to West, Jan. 25, 1950, Snell papers.

56. In his termination letter, West gave no clear reason but did note that Snell was two years beyond usual retirement age. West to Snell, Jan. 5, 1950, Snell papers.

57. Franklin L. West, *Discovering the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, 1950).

Some Thoughts on Addressing Difficult Scriptural Issues

A major challenge facing Sperry and Snell in writing their textbooks on the Old Testament was devising effective ways to handle the conflicts between liberal biblical scholarship and traditional Mormon teaching. The effort to reconcile these two perspectives entails a high level of intellectual command of both sides, the ability to compromise, a sincere belief in Mormonism, and considerable ingenuity. As apostle and scientist John A. Widtsoe, who had made his own attempts to address the conflicts between science and Mormonism,[58] cautioned Snell: "It is very difficult . . . to write a book on any subject that accepts the scholarship of the world and the revelations of these latter days."[59] In addressing individual conflicts, Sperry and Snell could choose among three approaches:

1. Defend the liberal or the traditional viewpoint.
   In this strategy, one side attempts to persuade the other that the former's methodology, evidence, and conclusions are decisive and should be accepted. We will call this a direct persuasion argument.
2. Propose a novel theory of accommodation.
   A theory of accommodation may take several forms. The following will be important in the analysis that follows. Morally or theologically objectionable material found in the scriptures themselves may be blamed on human author failings (an author bias theory) or universal human limitations (a fallible human theory). In a theory of expansion, seemingly anachronistic scriptural inclusions are explained as incorporation of later material. We will use a theory of synthesis as a more generalized description of an accommodation in which selected elements of both scholarly positions are combined into a new schema. A theorist may mount a counterargument, moving into the opponent's areas of

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58. For a discussion of some of Widtsoe's accommodations see Clyde D. Ford, "Materialism and Mormonism: The Early Twentieth-Century Philosophy of Dr. John A. Widtsoe," *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 1–26.

59. Widtsoe to Snell, Mar. 29, 1949, Snell papers.

presuppositions, methodology, and/or conclusions and showing that the theorist's positions are also the more reasonable on the opponent's turf.

In formulating their accommodation theories, Sperry and Snell also needed to be careful to avoid logical fallacies and to be mindful of the theoretical virtues. Logical fallacies include arguments from ignorance (a proposition is true because it has not been proved false), appeals to inappropriate authority, non sequitur arguments (the conclusions do not follow from the premises), and ad hominem arguments (attacking the opponent rather than the proposition).[60] It is also important to avoid offering pseudo-counterarguments, which appeals to selected, sympathetic, often outdated, and inappropriately praised "experts." The most important theoretical virtues for this study are empirical accuracy (Does the theory adequately explain the issue under consideration?) and external consistency (Is the theory consistent with accepted Mormon core doctrines?).[61]

3. Avoid addressing the issue.
    This may be done in several ways:
    a. Avoid bringing the issue up at all, a strategy of neglect.
    b. Adopt a strategy of non-commitment, in which both sides of the dispute are presented leaving the final adjudication to the reader.
    c. Present an argument for irrelevance, concluding that the issue is not of adequate importance for analysis.

Sperry and Snell Address Some Problems of the Old Testament

In what follows, we will examine five key issues, contrasting the approaches of Sperry and Snell, and explore how the ideas of each fared. The first three issues are derived from an address Snell gave to

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60. Lists of logical fallacies are available in many textbooks and online. See, for example, "Logical Fallacies," Purdue Online Writing Lab, https://owl.purdue .edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/logic_in_argumentative_writing /fallacies.html.

61. See Samuel Schindler, *Theoretical Virtues in Science: Uncovering Reality Through Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

a convention of Church educators in 1937, issues that Snell felt were particularly important to his Old Testament institute students.[62] The last two are additional issues that Sperry and Snell, respectively, were particularly concerned with. I will refer to the scholarly biblical critical sources that Sperry and Snell themselves utilized.[63]

Issue 1. Old Testament literary unity: The problem of duplications and contradictions

Did Noah take seven pairs or one pair of clean beasts into the ark (Genesis 7:2, 9)? In order to account for duplications/contradictions and other problems in the Pentateuch, biblical critics had posited that three independent sources had been combined using a cut-and-paste technique to form the books Genesis through Numbers, to which Deuteronomy had been appended.[64] The sources were all dated well after Moses.[65] The theory is known as the Documentary Hypothesis

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62. Snell, "Criteria for interpreting the Old Testament," 95–117.

63. S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928); Julius August Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament in Its Historical Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1922). Sperry used Driver as a source in his book and Snell used Bewer. Snell also used Bewer in his institute Bible classes and some more liberal Church authorities also valued its study. For example, Hugh B. Brown noted that his study group of four General Authorities made it a "regular practice to refer to Bewer's book," which they "regarded highly," but emphasized the need to prioritize Mormon prophetic interpretations when appropriate. See Snell to the Executive Committee of the Church Board of Education, Mar. 8, 1949, Snell papers; Brown to Snell, Oct. 11, 1956, Snell papers.

64. Driver, *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, 86–87, 116–59; Bewer, *Literature of the Old Testament*, chaps. 5, 6, 9, 17.

65. In addition to a more recent variety of literary critical arguments, it was noted as early as medieval times that the Pentateuch describes Moses' death, speaks of him in the third person, lists individuals who lived after Moses, and other observations suggesting composition after Moses' time. See David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:610–19.

and it conflicted with the traditional view of Mosaic authorship, which seemed to be supported, at least for the first chapters of Genesis, by Mormon scripture (Moses 2:1).[66]

Snell contended for the Documentary Hypothesis using a direct persuasion approach. He argued that only this solution satisfied the theoretical virtue of empirical adequacy. For Snell, the theory of Mosaic authorship failed to explain the duplications/contradictions. "How can such problems be best met?" he wrote. "By utilizing, I think, a theory which shows that the several conflicting reports come from different sources. Such a theory actually does resolve these problems and I know of no other explanation which does. Another helpful rule of interpretation in this connection is that *we ought to be governed in our judgments by internal evidence of the books themselves, and by such external evidence as may exist, rather than by mere tradition.*"[67]

Conversely, Sperry, recognizing both the validity of the critical arguments and the entrenched position of Mosaic authorship in

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66. As Old Testament literary scholar Konrad Schmid has recently noted, "There has been considerable disagreement among scholars from around the world on the question of the validity of the so-called Documentary Hypothesis." Some of the challenges include the suggestion that the compiler(s) actively shaped the tradition, disagreements over the methodology for identifying the sources, and the fact that, as Robert Alter argues, seeing the text as a "patchwork of frequently disparate documents" rather than "an intricately interconnected unity" causes the reader to miss the "small verbal signals of continuity" and the "significant lexical nuances." See Konrad Schmid, "The Neo-Documentarian Manifesto: A Critical Reading," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140, no. 3 (2021): 461; and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 11. For some differing perspectives, see Thomas B. Dozeman and Konrad Schmid, eds., *A Farewell to the Yahwist?: The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006); Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2005); Joel S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 2012).

67. Snell, "Criteria for Interpreting the Old Testament," 96, emphasis in the original.

Mormon tradition, resorted to a strategy of non-commitment: "If it be admitted that the Pentateuch (first five books of the Old Testament) was composed in the days of Moses—a fact denied by many—we could say that the Old Testament represents the writings of men over a period of about one thousand years." Sperry referred to the composer(s)/editor(s) of Genesis variously as the "writer," "author," "narrator," or "compiler," always in the singular, leaving room for the reader to decide on the author's identity and the sources.[68] That Sperry's stance of noncommitment is intentional here is shown by his identification of Moses as the author and compiler of Genesis in a prior Church publication.[69]

Snell's proposal failed to make much headway, primarily because of futile attempts to convince Joseph Fielding Smith. Smith insisted that Snell's defense of liberal scholarship failed on the basis of both faulty scholarship, evidenced by a pseudo-counterargument from Smith, and insufficient external consistency. Echoing Fosdick's description of conservatives' stereotype of liberals, Smith attacked Snell for lacking "knowledge" and "understanding" since "the things of God are not understood by the spirit of man."[70]

Sperry's work did not receive the same level of criticism from Smith and was adopted by some of his successors in their own Church publications. For example, ignoring the arguments for later dating, Sperry student Ellis T. Rasmussen posited: "Could other materials have been made available to Moses, from which he could 'compose Genesis'?"[71]

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68. Sperry, *Spirit of Old Testament*, 6, 32, 18–31.

69. Sidney B. Sperry, "Genesis 12:1–13, An Abridgment of the Book of Abraham," *Improvement Era* 2, no. 12 (Oct. 1932): 727–28. There Sperry had proposed that Moses had composed at least the first part of Genesis (see Moses 2:1) but probably compiled much of the remainder using written sources, which may have included the Mormon Book of Abraham.

70. Smith, *Man, His Origin and Destiny*, 493. See especially chapter 26, where Snell's *Ancient Israel* is repeatedly quoted and rejected.

71. Ellis T. Rasmussen, *Patriarchs of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1964), 3.

Issue 2. Problems with Old Testament ethics:
The moral character of God

Are God's interventions in human affairs governed by jealousy and anger, as a number of Old Testament passages suggest? Given that we tend to associate these negative emotions with irrational and non-benevolent behavior, doesn't this undermine our confidence in deity? Do these apparently false characterizations of deity cast doubt on the integrity of the Old Testament and its authors?

Snell favored an author bias theory superimposed on his view of progressive history. He proposed that inaccurate descriptions of God are due to unavoidable intrusions into scripture of the personal and ancient cultural prejudices of the human authors. "The stories which make parts of the Old Testament unreadable (for some people) appear in a different light if they are considered as representing relatively low stages of culture out of which, largely by the preaching of the prophets, the Hebrews moved," he wrote. "But some bright student might ask, 'Is not God the same in all ages?' And we must agree at once that according to authentic Bible teaching He is. But this answer by no means carries with it the admission that *man's ideas of God* are the same in all ages. These have undergone change, even within the Old Testament period."[72]

Sperry, who was clearly interested in preserving scriptural and prophetic integrity, proposed a fallible human theory, postulating that because of their inherent conceptual limitations, humans are not able to comprehend an omni-being. For this reason, prophets were forced to portray God's attributes by employing understandable anthropomorphic features, which Sperry ingeniously recast in a favorable light. As he noted:

> Another [prophetic] function was to reveal God to man. Jehovah is so portrayed as to make him more comprehensible to the finite minds of His people. The Lord is represented as possessing attributes much

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72. Snell, "Criteria for Interpreting the Old Testament," 97, emphasis in the original.

in common with man, therefore. He spoke to the people according to their understanding and weaknesses. He was described as being jealous of the reverence paid to truth and righteousness and to Him who exemplified all good. As a result of sin and rebellion against Jehovah, He was angry with men since that which they rejected was designed for their welfare. . . . Jehovah was above all a God of love.[73]

Sperry's theory is based on Doctrine and Covenants 1:24, where God declares that "these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding," demonstrating its external consistency.

Although Snell could potentially claim external consistency for his theory by citing the confessions of prophets such as Mormon, who admitted the possibility of error in his own writing (Mormon 8:17), his theory of progressive theology and his impugning of scriptural inspiration and integrity were resisted by conservative Mormons like Smith. Perhaps in response to Snell, Smith insisted that "The [correct] knowledge of God was known among the first inhabitants of this earth" and "Members of the Church . . . are under obligation to accept the Bible as the word of God as far as it is translated correctly."[74]

Conversely, Sperry's accommodation was reproduced in his 1966 Gospel Doctrine manual,[75] indicating official sanction by the Church. It also appeared unchanged in the second edition of his book, which was published and republished by the Church's Deseret Book Company.[76]

Issue 3. Problems with Old Testament historicity: The case of Jonah

Was Jonah really swallowed by a big fish, living in the fish's stomach for three days?

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73. Sperry, *Spirit of the Old Testament*, 119.

74. Smith, *Man, His Origin and Destiny*, 267–68.

75. Sperry, *Old Testament Prophets*, 8.

76. Sperry, *Spirit of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed., 122.

Conservative biblical scholars defended the historicity of the book of Jonah.[77] Conversely, liberal biblical critics concluded that the story cannot be reasonably defended as factual, and thus the book of Jonah is, as scholars from the time had claimed, "no narrative of historical facts but a prose poem with a purpose. . . . All must learn that Yahweh is not the God of the Jews only but the God of all men."[78]

Snell proposed the synthesis theory that the book of Jonah, although not completely historical, may contain historical elements (not specified). Nevertheless, the author/narrator clearly has in mind to convey a moral message: "The solution I shall use is the theory that the book of Jonah is not simon-pure history (I do not deny possible historical elements) but a story with a teaching aim."[79]

Sperry agreed with Snell that it is better to focus on the moral implications of the Jonah story but also recognized the problems inherent in accepting some aspects as fictional. Sperry felt that strategies of dismissal and non-commitment were best: "We are more concerned with the teachings of the Book of Jonah than with mere technicalities or problems of criticism." For those "who [still] wish to interpret it more technically," Sperry summarized the evidence supporting the "historical" view and the "allegorical" view. He then advised: "Before coming to definite conclusions respecting the interpretation of the Book of Jonah the careful student will, of course, give due weight to all of the considerations pointed out above." Sperry suggested several allegorical interpretations: "God's divine grace is universal", the importance of

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77. For example, see Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 10:379–89. Keil and Delitzsch's commentary was published in 1866 and has been a conservative standard with multiple reprints since.

78. Bewer, *Literature of the Old Testament,* 404–05. W. O. E. Oesterley, *A History of Israel*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 123. Oesterley's *History* was used as a resource by both Sperry and Snell.

79. Snell, "Criteria for Interpreting the Old Testament," 95.

"obedience" to divine commands, the fulfillment of "prophecy is conditional" upon repentance, "higher patriotism."[80]

As expected, conservative Mormons such as Joseph Fielding Smith defended the historicity of the entire book of Jonah.[81] Sperry used this accommodation approach again in his 1966 Gospel Doctrine manual, noting: "The obvious intent of the book is to drive home a religious lesson, whether or not we agree that its details are historical."[82]

Issue 4: Proof texting: The case of Ezekiel 37:15–20

During the first few years of the Church, Mormon theologians suggested new biblical interpretations that predicted Mormon historical events and justified Mormon doctrines. Among these were passages that foretold the advent of the Book of Mormon. Some appeared in the Book of Mormon itself,[83] while others had been discovered by 1832.[84] The best known of the latter is Ezekiel 37:15–20, the famous passage describing the stick of Judah and the stick of Joseph and their joining. Based on literary context, especially the apparent explanation in Ezekiel 37:21–28, the sticks have been understood by scholars as representing the kingdoms of Judah and Israel and their reunification.[85] Early Mormons saw references to the Bible (stick of Judah) and the Book of Mormon (stick of Joseph). Who first suggested this interpretation has been a matter of dispute.[86]

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80. Sperry, *Spirit of the Old Testament*, 151–55.

81. Smith, *Man, His Origin and Destiny*, 11.

82. Sperry, *Old Testament Prophets*, 298.

83. For example, Isaiah 29 and John 10.

84. Several familiar Book of Mormon proof-texts (Genesis 49:22–26, Psalm 85:11, Ezekiel 37:15–20) appeared in the *Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 1 (Nov. 1832): 6 and no. 8 (Jan. 1833): 1.

85. Driver, *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, 291; Bewer, *Literature of the Old Testament*, 178.

86. There have been several suggestions from persons in this study regarding the individual who first discovered the Mormon interpretation of Ezekiel

In his book, Snell appropriately chose a strategy of neglect of the Mormon interpretation so as not to threaten the possibility of college credit. However, privately Snell defended the scholarly interpretation as the only legitimate meaning, employing an argument of direct persuasion based on authorial intention. Snell's critique of the Mormon use of the Bible challenged what he considered to be inappropriate Mormon interpretations. Snell opposed "the dogmatic, or 'proof-text' method," which he described as "that use of scripture which finds in it confirmation or proof of certain teachings of the Church." Those putting forth proof-text meanings took "no thought of [historical] context" and, therefore, proof-texting "is not a study of scripture at all since its interest is to 'prove' certain presuppositions which may bear little or no real relation to texts cited"[87] and conveyed meanings never intended by the original author(s). For Snell, "the more one knows about the writer and his milieu the better one is prepared to uncover the meaning of his book."[88]

Sperry presented an interesting theory of synthesis incorporating the Mormon concept of continuing revelation with authorial intention. He agreed with Snell that scripture should be interpreted in the setting

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37:15–20, all without conclusive evidence. Sperry claimed to have found the meaning in the Book of Mormon itself (2 Nephi 29:14); Snell suggested that it was the Pratts (Parley and Orson); Joseph Fielding Smith argued that it was Joseph Smith. He based this on an entry in *Documentary History of the Church* 1:83–84 and Doctrine and Covenants 27:5b. However, Joseph Smith did not begin dictating his history for the *Documentary* until 1839, and verse 27:5b was not present in the original 1830 revelation but rather was added to the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Further, as many have pointed out, 27:5b does not equate the "stick" with a written record. See Heber C. Snell, Sidney B. Sperry, Kent Robson, "Roundtable: The Bible in the Church," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1967): 83; Snell to Smith, May 27, 1949, Snell papers; *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations and Translations Manuscript Revelation Books* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2009), 41.

87. Snell, Sperry, and Robson, "Roundtable," 58–61.

88. Snell, Sperry, and Robson, "Roundtable," 63.

of its historical milieu—"when one is attempting to interpret a given passage of scripture its context and historical background should be carefully explored"—and that improper use of the proof-text method "has led to a number of highly questionable interpretations."[89] But Sperry contended that the authorial intentions of ancient inspired prophets can sometimes be hidden to scholars and only discerned by other inspired prophets. This placed needed constraints on proof-texters since their meanings "can be checked and governed by living prophets and seers who, though reflection, and by the spirit of their calling, may be able to detect the truth or error." Sperry buttressed his approach with a counterargument based on textual criticism. He maintained that Ezekiel 37:21–28 is not an interpretation of Ezekiel 37:15–20. Rather, Ezekiel 37:21–28 should be read as a separate prophecy. (Although Sperry did not elucidate the reasons behind his exegesis here, the separation of the two passages is supportable by critical evidence.[90]) This freed up Ezekiel 37:15–20 from its "context," leaving scholars in an interpretative quandary, but not believing Mormons. Sperry concluded that what "the Lord is telling Ezekiel" is actually the Mormon interpretation.[91]

Not surprisingly, Snell again was met with criticism from Joseph Fielding Smith, who rejected his argument on the basis of external consistency. Snell related the encounter: "Why, of course it [Ezekiel 37:15–20] doesn't mean the *Bible* and *The Book of Mormon*. It means the two nations." Snell then read Ezekiel 37:21–28 and added: "It is as plain as day just reading the passage itself, that the prophet is referring to the nations of Israel and Judah, that he and other prophets wanted

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89. Snell, Sperry, and Robson, "Roundtable," 83, 81.

90. For example, Old Testament scholar Walther Zimmerli's conclusion that verses 21 onward are a later added "interpretation" is based on the repetition of the "proclamation:" "thus saith the Lord God" (compare verse 19) and the lack of any mention of the sticks in the latter passage. Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 25–48* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 275.

91. Snell, Sperry, and Robson, "Roundtable," 81, 83.

reunited." Smith later responded: "From the beginning of our church, from Joseph Smith down, every president of the church has interpreted the passage as meaning the *Bible* and *The Book of Mormon*; therefore, that is what it means." Snell's belated evaluation of Smith's approach echoed Fosdick's liberal stereotype of conservatives: "what the devil kind of thing [reasoning] do you call that?"[92] It seems clear that Snell would have been better served by simply pointing out to Smith that including the Mormon interpretation would have been incompatible with the goal of college credit for institute classes. Despite Snell's rejection by official Mormondom, his work on Ezekiel 37 has been picked up and extended by others since then. For example, ancient Near East scholar Brian E. Keck echoed Snell in charging that Mormon proof-texting "ignores and obscures literary and structural aspects of the Hebrew Bible, aspects essential for understanding many theological and historical elements of Israelite religion and culture."[93]

It may seem surprising that neither Sperry nor Snell was willing to consider the possibility that a biblical passage might have more than one legitimate interpretation. This reflects their allegiance to the scholarly notion of authorial intention, an Enlightenment concept. But there are alternatives. For example, premodern theologians proposed textual theories of multiple interpretations as solutions to some scriptural problems.[94] Sperry and Snell might object that without the constraints

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92. Snell, "Interviews," 20–21.

93. Brian E. Keck, "Ezekiel 37, Sticks, and Babylonian Writing Boards: A Critical Reappraisal" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 126–27.

94. Among others, one is reminded of Philo of Alexandria's (d. c. 50 CE) outer and inner (allegorical) meanings, Origen's (d. c. 253 CE) literal, moral, and spiritual readings, and the four senses of medieval exegetes (literal, typological, moral, anagogical). Even in Snell's and Sperry's day Karl Barth (d. 1968) suggested three human stages of interpretation. For a more detailed recent discussion see Ineke Van 't Spijker, ed., *The Multiple Meaning of Scripture: The Role of Exegesis in Early-Christian and Medieval Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

of historical criticism there is nothing preventing the continual prolif-
eration of illegitimate proof-texts. Here again, Sperry's proposal that
interpretations should be confirmed by Church leaders, scripture, or
personal inspiration may help to impose at least some limits.[95]

Issue 5. Problems with Old Testament dating and authorship: The "Isaiah problem"

Sperry took a special interest in the controversies surrounding the
inclusion of Isaiah, especially chapters 48 through 54, in the Book
of Mormon (found in 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi), which he termed the
"Isaiah problem." A problem of authorship and date stems from the
relative consensus among Old Testament literary critics that chapters
40 through 55 are to be dated no earlier than the fifth century BCE,
decades after Lehi left Jerusalem with the brass plates.[96] A translation
problem results not only from the marked similarity in wording of the
Book of Mormon and the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible (since
the latter was not available before 1611 and reflects the limitations of
knowledge of the Hebrew language, available manuscripts, and English
language usage of the seventeenth century) but also a number of dif-
ferences between the Isaiah passages in the Book of Mormon and KJV.

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95. Sperry's examples of Genesis 18:2–8 and Amos 8:11–12 show some problems
with using his method of confirmation. Sperry rejected the use by missionaries
of Genesis 18:2–8 as evidence that "God the Father has a glorified, resurrected
body of flesh and bones." Sperry supported his contention that this is a false
proof-text by relating a meeting with apostle James E. Talmage in which the
latter confirmed Sperry's suspicion. But Sperry also felt that Amos 8:11–12 was
a misused proof-text as a scriptural prediction of the Mormon doctrine of
a "Great Apostasy" following the Savior's earthly sojourn. Yet Talmage uses
Amos 8:11–12 for just this purpose in *Jesus the Christ*, a text accepted as doc-
trinal by the Church. See Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 753; Snell, Sperry, and
Robson, "Roundtable," 81–82.

96. Driver, *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, 229–30; Bewer,
Literature of the Old Testament, 200.

Sperry was not the first to recognize these problems. They had been pointed out by Brigham H. Roberts in 1909.[97] But Sperry addressed them with some novel insights and greater scholarly competence.

Sperry, like Roberts, proposed a theory of expansion to deal with the translation problem: "We therefore freely admit that Joseph Smith used the King James Version when he came to the text of Isaiah on the gold plates. As long as the familiar version substantially agreed with the text on the gold plates record he let it pass; when it differed too much, he translated the Nephite version and dictated the necessary changes."[98] In this, Sperry was cleverly able to both resolve the problem and bolster Joseph Smith's reputation as a translator.

To deal with the chronological problems of dating and authorship of those chapters of Isaiah, Sperry put forward a novel counterargument based on textual criticism.[99] Sperry well recognized the problem of accumulating errors as ancient Hebrew manuscripts were copied and recopied, giving rise to many linguistic variants among the Hebrew manuscripts. Many of these textual corruptions were likely present in the Masoretic text, the main Hebrew source for the Old Testament of the King James Version (seventeenth century). Variant ancient Hebrew texts, no longer extant, also likely accounted for many of the differences among the ancient translations (Greek Septuagint [third to second century BCE], Syriac Peshitta [second century], Latin Vulgate [fourth century]) themselves and with the Masoretic text. And since,

97. B. H. Roberts, "An Objection to the Book of Mormon Answered," *Improvement Era* 12, no. 9 (July 1909): 682.

98. Sidney B. Sperry, "The 'Isaiah Problem' in the Book of Mormon, Part II," *Improvement Era* 42, no. 10 (Oct. 1939): 594.

99. Sperry was well acquainted with textual criticism, having gained experience with it in researching his master's thesis and PhD dissertation as well as attending a class in textual criticism at the University of Chicago in the autumn of 1928.

in Sperry's view, the Hebrew version underlying the Book of Mormon translations could be no younger than 600 BCE, the date Lehi's party left Jerusalem with the brass plates, the Book of Mormon version would be the least likely to contain corruptions. Therefore, Sperry reasoned, if the Book of Mormon Isaiah version differed from the KJV, then the Hebrew text of the latter had been corrupted. Moreover, "by the law of chance" one might be able to find at least some of the Book of Mormon differences supported by one or more of the other ancient translations whose Hebrew original had not been corrupted. After presenting what he felt were several supporting examples, Sperry concluded that he had shown "substantial evidence that the translator of the Book of Mormon had before him a version of Isaiah more ancient than any now in existence and that he actually translated."[100]

Several objections might be raised concerning Sperry's logic here. For example, he might be accused of begging the question or affirming the consequent. And Sperry does not clearly distinguish between problems of translation and transmission. For some other more specific objections, let's examine Sperry's best known and favorite example, Isaiah 2:16 (2 Nephi 12:16).

Book of Mormon	KJV	Septuagint[101]
And upon all the ships of the sea,		And upon every ship of the sea
and upon all the ships of Tarshish	And upon all the ships of Tarshish	
and upon all pleasant pictures	and upon all pleasant pictures	and upon every display of fine ships.

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100. Sperry, "Isaiah Problem," 594–637.

101. Sperry lacked formal training in Greek and was using Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton's nineteenth-century translation of the fourth-century CE *Codex Vaticanus*, supplemented where needed by the fifth-century *Codex Alexandrinus*.

Sperry proposed that the KJV and Septuagint had each lost a line of poetry and that the Book of Mormon preserves the original.

Isaiah 2:12–17 constitutes a poetic unit considered to originate with Isaiah himself, although it has undergone some subsequent modification. The poem has an apparent original structure consisting of consecutive bicola (sets of two short lines that are parallel to each other). In each bicola, one can readily discern all of Robert Alter's three major types of parallelism: syntactic (same order of grammatical elements), semantic (similar meanings of corresponding elements in the two lines), and metric (same number of stresses, not generally translatable).[102] Preservation of parallelism suggests the original, and disruption identifies subsequent corruption. These observations are helpful in evaluating the validity of Sperry's proposals.

1. The words "high and lifted up" (KJV Isaiah 2:13), which disrupt the meter and are considered to be an addition,[103] are reproduced in the Book of Mormon. In addition, the Book of Mormon version adds material to the KJV of Isaiah 2:12–17 that further disrupts the parallelism.
2. The Book of Mormon tricola of 2:16 disrupts the expected bicola pattern.[104]

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102. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, rev. and updated (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

103. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 193.

104. Wesley P. Walters, "The Use of the Old Testament in the Book of Mormon" (master's thesis, Covenant Theological Seminary, 1981), 59; Dana M. Pike and David R. Seely, "'Upon all the Ships of the Sea, and Upon All the Ships of Tarshish': Revisiting 2 Nephi 12:16 and Isaiah 2:16," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 16.

3. The Septuagint "ship of the sea" is generally considered to be the Greek translator's interpretation of the Hebrew "ships of Tarshish," rather than a separate unit."[105,106]

4. The KJV translation "pleasant pictures" is parallel to "ships of Tarshish" and is expected to have a similar meaning. "Pleasant pictures" seems to be a mistranslation occasioned by a misunderstanding of the Hebrew by the KJV translators.[107] This translation had been abandoned by modern Bible translators but is reproduced in the Book of Mormon.

105. Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 101. Notably, the Greek is not listed as an alternative reading in critical Hebrew editions.

106. This had led to several alterative hypothesis to explain the Book of Mormon tricola. Royal Skousen suggests that "in some earlier transmission of the Hebrew text the phrase 'upon all ships of the sea' was a marginal note explaining the phrase 'upon all the ships of Tarshish' but that eventually this explanatory note was inserted directly into the text itself." The existence of marginal notes in the Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsaa) from Qumran may lend some support to Skousen's hypothesis. Wesley Walters has pointed out that several Bibles and biblical commentaries of the early nineteenth century referenced the alternate Septuagint reading. Whether Joseph Smith had access to these is less clear since many of the Bibles of the day, including the one purchased by Joseph Smith in 1829 for use in his biblical revision, used John Canne's *Marginal Notes and References* (1647), which did not include the Septuagint reading. Alternatively, Ronald Huggins proposed that the extra line may have originated from Martin Luther's translation (through the Whitmer family) or from Methodist Adam Clarke's commentary. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Two: 2 Nephi 11–Mosiah 16* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 2005), 660; *Scrolls from Qumran Cave I* (Jerusalem: Albright Institute of Archaeological Research, 1974); Walters, "Use of the Old Testament," 59; Ronald V. Huggins, "'Without a Cause' and 'Ships of Tarshish': A Possible Contemporary Source for Two Unexplained Readings from Joseph Smith," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 1 (2003): 169, 173.

107. Wildberger explains the issue thus: "In earlier times, שכיות (luxury ships) was considered to have come from [the Hebrew root] שכה and understood to mean "object for viewing, thing to be looked at" . . . Since this does not fit in and balance with . . . ships of Tarshish . . . it seems that the source of the word שכיות is the Egyptian work *sk.tj* 'ship.'" Pike and Seely also suggest a possible cognate in Ugaritic. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 101; Pike and Seely, "Revisiting 2 Nephi 12:16," 18.

In contrast to Sperry, Snell endorsed a liberal direct persuasion strategy in his book and again met with criticism from Joseph Fielding Smith. Snell recalled that even Franklin West had suggested the advisability of a strategy of neglect: "'Why in the devil, Snell, did you put that in about the 'Second Isaiah' in your book?" Snell replied that it was necessary to fulfill the book's purpose: "I was trying to write a story of the Hebrew people, and I couldn't write that truthfully without putting in what some scholars consider the greatest prophet of the *Old Testament*, the Second Isaiah.'"[108] Nevertheless, the issue put Snell on the defensive, and he pivoted to strategies of dismissal and non-commitment. He contended that the "[Isaiah] problem" is of "minor importance," "not one of the fundamentals of religion," and "matters little." He also argued that "Even if this view [Isaiah 40–55 is exilic] should come to general acceptance there could still be a question as to the date of the Isaiah sections quoted in the Book of Mormon." Snell also presented a challenge for further research by adding: "I can think of other possible solutions of the problem."[109]

Whereas Snell's proposal met with rejection, Sperry's analysis, especially of Isaiah 2:16, has persisted, despite the formidable scholarly objections. It was reproduced in his 1966 Gospel Doctrine Sunday School manual, and his textual analysis was added as a footnote to 2 Nephi 12:16 in the 1979 edition of the Latter-day Saint Book of Mormon, which "bestows a seemingly official status on it."[110] Sperry's theory and suggested approach were expanded by his student H. Grant Vest and

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108. Snell, "Interviews," 7.

109. Snell to Executive Committee, Mar. 8, 1949, Snell papers.

110. Pike and Seely, "Revisiting 2 Nephi 12:16," 14. These authors document the wide influence of Sperry's theory.

later updated to include additional sources, such as the Qumran scrolls, by Sperry himself and conservative Mormon scholar John Tvedtnes.[111]

Conclusions

Scriptural problems are always with us, causing distress and needing resolution, as we saw in the examples at the beginning of this study. Because of their formal education and Mormon belief, Sperry and Snell were at the forefront of addressing these issues during the early twentieth century. They were aided by an atmosphere of support from Church leaders, such as Franklin West and others. Sperry's and Snell's work was also stimulated by rank-and-file Mormons when they were encouraged to show intellectual curiosity and questioning in their scriptural study, as Snell experienced with his students.

Among the possible approaches to conflicts, liberal direct persuasion arguments were the least effective. Conservatives tend to counter with their own direct persuasion arguments, and these disputes often degenerate into at least implicit accusations of Fosdick's stereotypes. We saw this in the dispute over the interpretation of Ezekiel 37:15–20 between Snell and Joseph Fielding Smith.

Novel accommodation theories are the most interesting approaches and the only alternatives that add real conceptual advances. However, these are also the most difficult and require considerable expertise and ingenuity since they must be comfortably received by Mormons with a

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111. H. Grant Vest, "The Problem of Isaiah in The Book of Mormon" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1938), https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu /etd/5188. Sperry found the Great Isaiah Scroll from Qumran to be of "little use" as the differences did not support the Book of Mormon version. Sperry concluded that the scroll was "inferior to the conventional [Masoretic] Hebrew text" for textual analysis. See Sidney B. Sperry, *Knowledge is Power* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 255–56; and John A. Tvedtnes, *The Isaiah Variants in the Book of Mormon* (Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1981).

variety of views. As we saw in the follow-up conversations about Sperry's explanation of 2 Nephi 12:16 (Isaiah 2:16), accommodation theories are subject to modifications and even replacement as new information and alternative ideas become available. Thus, Sperry and Snell might be best viewed as pioneers who laid the groundwork for needed continuing intellectual encounters with scriptural issues by faithful scholars.[112]

Sperry's and Snell's work suggests to us that there are some scriptural issues that are difficult, if not impossible, to find a suitable accommodation theory for. Presenting both sides and letting the reader/listener draw their own conclusions, as Sperry did with the story of Jonah, seems a reasonable approach that tends not to draw heat from either side.

The enthusiasm that greeted Snell's and Sperry's presentations to their Church Educational System peers shows that open discussion and the search for acceptable approaches to scriptural problems can be of significant benefit. These allow believing Mormons to tolerate conflicts with less confusion and distress. They also encourage Mormons of differing views to discuss their differences in an atmosphere of greater comfort, openness, and tolerance. However, as Snell learned, success also requires respect for and responsiveness to the issues and objections raised by Church leaders.

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112. Significantly, the issues addressed here and others have been further advanced recently by three current Mormon scholars, all holding PhDs in ancient and/or biblical studies. Their resolutions seem to sometimes favor Sperry, or Snell, or elements of both. See Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, and David Rolph Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 144–55, 154, 178, 346, 295. The publication of their work by Deseret Book suggests that their points of view may have met with some acceptance in the twenty-first-century Church.

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