

Sign or Scripture: Approaches to the Book of Mormon

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Why does discussion of the Book of Mormon typically tend to focus on questions of its historicity and authorship, on Mesoamerican archeology, chiasmus, and wordprints? These subjects are certainly valid and worth pursuing, but I find a more personally relevant question to be: How does the Book of Mormon present the basic doctrines of the gospel? What role should the Book of Mormon play in our religious and intellectual lives? Is it a sign of the divine origin of the Restoration movement or is it scripture? Do we use it as a weapon to convince doubters of the truth of our position or as a source for our own reflection on the meaning and truthfulness of our religious teaching?

When I talk about using the Book of Mormon as a sign, I refer to the tendency to use it to demonstrate the divine origin of the Latter Day Saint/Latter-day Saint movement or to demonstrate that Joseph Smith, Jr., was a prophet.¹ It is not necessarily inappropriate to use the Book of Mormon in this way, provided the claims can be substantiated. Nevertheless, using the Book of Mormon as a sign is different from using it as scripture.

The term "scripture" is, at once, more precise and more difficult. In one sense, scripture simply consists of those writings defined as such by the Church (meaning both RLDS and LDS churches). Beyond this rather circular definition, however, the term becomes somewhat murky. The Church defines scripture to establish some kind of ultimate doctrinal authority. The New Testament canon, for example, was initially defined to counter the canon established by the heretic Marcion. Thus, to fix the canon was to establish doctrinal orthodoxy in an authoritative way.

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¹ Tillich would argue that the Book of Mormon should be classified as a symbol rather than a sign since it can be seen as participating in the reality to which it points (1959, 54-56).

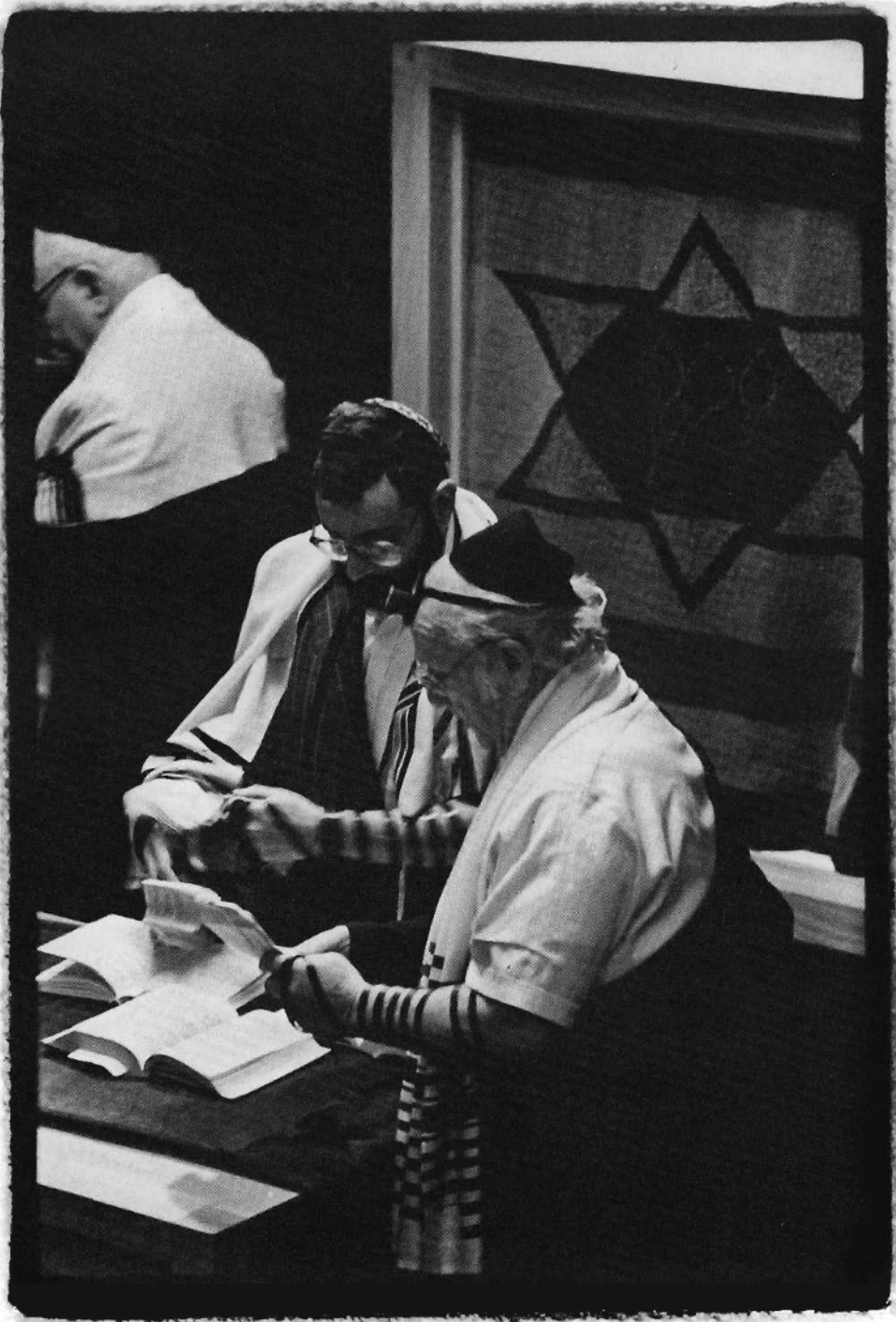
Scripture, then, is a source of doctrinal orthodoxy, but the precise nature of that authority is open to interpretation. In the early centuries of the Christian era, a literalistic interpretation of scripture was one approach among many. Biblical literalism as the only legitimate approach to scripture was largely the invention of conservative protestants during the nineteenth century. Generally speaking, neither the LDS nor the RLDS churches have supported a fully literalistic approach to scriptural interpretation. This reluctance can be attributed both to suspicions about the integrity of the biblical text and to a high regard for contemporary revelation. On the other hand, the literature of both churches contains numerous examples of proof-texting, which is implicitly literalistic. We tend to have a high view of the authority of scripture but do not want to give scriptures complete doctrinal authority because of our equally high regard for contemporary revelation. Furthermore, when conflicts arise between our stated beliefs and the scriptures, we sometimes ignore the scriptures altogether. The problem is practical: What do we do when our scriptures support doctrines which are at variance with our own views and with the official doctrinal statements of our religious institutions?

The LDS and RLDS churches have a similar problem in defining the nature of scriptural authority. I do not intend to solve that problem in this brief essay. Indeed, I expect that the two churches will approach that problem in quite different ways. However, I will explore the problems through some Book of Mormon examples in hopes of clarifying the nature of the problem.

Any responsible study of scripture should first establish the text, preferably in the original language, and the political, social, and cultural context out of which the scripture arose. Yet, even so basic an issue is unresolved with respect to the Book of Mormon. Is it an actual account of the peoples whose stories it tells? We have not yet been able to develop an ancient American context with enough persuasiveness and richness of detail to contribute to our understanding of what the Book of Mormon is saying. To my knowledge, no one has ever been able to identify a significant correlation between Book of Mormon place names and personal names with ancient American place names and personal names. Similarly, I am unaware of a widely accepted chronology of an ancient American civilization which correlates with the chronology of the Book of Mormon. In themselves, these factors do not "disprove" the Book of Mormon; they simply make it difficult to interpret it from an ancient American context.

Is the Book of Mormon the creation of Joseph Smith? If so, we can establish the text in its original language and we can know a great deal about the conditions which prevailed when it was written, but why, then, should it be accepted as scripture? Needless to say, the obvious disadvantage of this position is that most Church members do not believe that Joseph Smith composed the Book of Mormon.

Thus we are left with this apparent dilemma: Either the Book of Mormon was written on golden plates which were delivered to Joseph Smith by an angel and translated by supernatural means, or it was written by a semi-literate farmer. This is hostile territory for Occam's razor. It is not my intention to



offer evidence and summarize arguments once again. Although such work must be done, my concern is with interpreting the Book of Mormon, a task that is always done on less than solid ground, regardless of our sympathies.

The Book of Mormon is pessimistic about human nature (Lindgren 1983). According to Book of Mormon teachings, we are not on a progressive journey to righteousness and perfection. Rather, as we become righteous, we prosper. As we prosper, we become proud. Our pride leads us to sin. Thus, our righteousness holds within itself the seeds of our downfall. The golden age of the Nephites, for example, leads not to glory, but to destruction. If the Book of Mormon is a story of the conflict between good and evil, it is disturbing to note that evil wins twice.

The following example from the book of Helaman demonstrates the pessimism of the Book of Mormon at its extreme:

Oh, how foolish, and how vain, and how evil and devilish, and how quick to do iniquity, and how slow to do good are the children of men; how quick to hearken to the words of the evil one and to set their hearts upon the vain things of the world; how quick to be lifted up in pride; and how quick to boast and do all manner of that which is iniquity; and how slow are they to remember the Lord their God and to give ear to his counsels; how slow to walk in wisdom's paths!

Behold, they do not desire that the Lord their God, who has created them, should rule and reign over them; notwithstanding his great goodness and his mercy toward them, they do set at naught his counsels, and they will not that he should be their guide.

Oh how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth (RLDS Hel. 4:53-57; LDS 12:4-7).

Godhood is hardly within our reach. We are depraved, and our depravity does not result from our willfulness alone. It comes from the structure of human existence itself. We are, through no choice of our own, in the midst of a cycle in which our righteousness will lead to prosperity and pride, and eventually to sin. What, then, do we do with eternal progression?

For a second example, let us look briefly at the doctrine of the trinity (Hale 1983). At first glance, the Book of Mormon would appear to have a rather classical, trinitarian understanding of God. In 3 Nephi, for example, we find: "And after this manner shall ye baptize in my name, for, behold, verily I say to you that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one; and I am in the Father, and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one" (RLDS 5:27; LDS 11:27). But what does Jesus mean here when he says that he and the Father are one? Is he being trinitarian, or does he mean something else?

We get a clue from 2 Nephi: "But there is a God, and he is Christ; and he comes in the fullness of his own time" (RLDS 8:14; LDS 11:7). This passage seems to indicate that God and Christ are one and the same, but it is possible that is just a manner of speaking, a way of saying that Jesus Christ is divine. Yet we must consider the words of Abinidi:

Now Abinidi said to them, "I would that you should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men and shall redeem his people.

"And because he dwells in flesh, he shall be called the Son of God; and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son — the

Father because he was conceived by the power of God, and the Son because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son — they are one God, the very eternal Father of heaven and of earth.

“Thus the flesh becoming subject to the Spirit, or the Son to the Father, being one God, suffers temptation, and yields not to the temptation, but suffers himself to be mocked and scourged, and cast out, and disowned by his people” (RLDS Mosiah 8:28–32; LDS 15:1–5).

Note that Jesus *is* the Father, and that he is *called* the Son “because he dwells in the flesh.” This description of the nature of the Godhead appears to be a type of modalistic Monarchianism. Monarchianism, a view which has arisen several times in the history of Christianity, is a type of monotheism which rejects any compromise on the belief in one God, including the trinitarian assertion that the one God exists in three “persons.” Modalistic Monarchianism (known as “Sabellianism” for its third-century proponent who was excommunicated for his views and also as “patripassionism”) holds that God the Father and Jesus Christ are one and the same. God acts in different “modes”—sometimes as the Father, sometimes as the Son, and sometimes as the Holy Spirit.

The most striking thing about the presence of this idea in the Book of Mormon, however, is not its heretical status, but rather that it is so much in conflict today with the trinitarianism of the Reorganized Church and with the pluralism of the LDS Church. Somehow, the two churches have developed separate and opposing views of God, both of which apparently conflict with the idea of God presented in the Book of Mormon.

How is it that we find ourselves in this situation? I think that it is because we have tended to use the Book of Mormon primarily as a sign and not as scripture. We have been concerned about its authorship and historicity. We have been concerned with ancient American archeology and chiasmus. But we have been less concerned with understanding the theological content of the Book of Mormon itself. To put it another way, the Book of Mormon has become an object of faith rather than a source of faith, a point of doctrine rather than a vehicle of doctrine. The result has been to obscure its theological content.

In the Restoration movement, we are both blessed and cursed with a powerful mythology, or faith-saga, concerning our origins. Ordinary events take on supernatural meanings. Joseph’s experience in the grove is not just a walk in the woods. It is a pivotal event in God’s purposeful activity in history. Similarly, the Book of Mormon is not just another book. The story of its coming forth cannot be separated from the story of the restoration of the Church. The Book of Mormon, then, becomes a powerful sign or symbol of the Restoration movement itself. Oddly enough, this tends to make the book opaque as we regard its teachings. We become awed by what the book stands for, and our awe distracts us from examining its content.

Scriptural status does not rest upon questions of historicity. It is likely that significant portions of the Old Testament canon are not fully historical as they stand today. Others, such as the book of Job, may not be historical

at all. Writings are scriptural because the Church holds them as normative or authoritative.

But the words "normative" and "authoritative" do not necessarily imply that each idea conveyed by scripture must be accepted uncritically. Such a position is, first of all, logically impossible because of conflicting ideas within the canon itself. More important, to see the gospel primarily in terms of doctrine is to make the gospel into an intellectual exercise. Scripture is normative and authoritative because it represents a common point for the beginning of theological discourse.

The faith of the Church is not grounded in a particular set of intellectual beliefs. It is grounded in the experience of being saved or redeemed by God through Jesus Christ. The faith once delivered to the Saints is the experience of salvation, not a list of doctrines. Doctrine may convey and communicate the faith, but it is not the faith itself. Doctrine helps us to understand what has happened to us and allows us to communicate that experience to others. If we do not understand ourselves as being redeemed, there is no faith. Scripture, then, must somehow reach out to us and convey the experience of redemption as well as ideas about redemption. Words written in one time and place may reach out to us, in another time and place, to reveal God's saving grace.

David Tracy examines this process through the idea of the "classic." A classic, Tracy writes, has an "excess of meaning" which allows it to speak in a way that transcends its own time and culture. A classic, in his view, should be encountered and understood rather than obeyed in the narrow sense of blind acceptance (1981, 99-130).

For the Church to say that the Book of Mormon is scripture, then, is to say that it has the capacity to illuminate and communicate the gospel. It has the capacity to engage us in a dialogue which enables us to understand the nature of God's redemption in our lives. If the Book of Mormon is capable of eliciting this kind of encounter, then the Church is amply justified in using it as scripture. Questions concerning its origin and authorship, while important in the process of interpretation, are secondary. As Tracy explains, "The classic text's fate is that only its constant reinterpretation by later finite, historical, temporal beings who will risk asking its questions and listening, critically and tactfully, to its responses can actualize the event of understanding beyond its present fixation in a text" (1981, 102).

In other words, unless we can maintain this encounter with a text, it dies for us as scripture. The most significant threat to the Book of Mormon, then, is not questions of its historicity. The most significant threat is that it will be ignored by the faithful. If we refuse to ask questions and listen to its responses, we will have an artifact which has no scriptural function despite our reverence for it.

What, then, would constitute a scriptural approach to the Book of Mormon? I suspect that most of us will find ourselves listening to it and arguing with it. I would not expect to find many members of the Restoration movement becoming modalistic Monarchianists because of Abinidi, however great his courage. But I expect people to continue to ask questions about the nature

of the human predicament, about the nature of God's redemptive activity in Christ, and about God's activity outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition. We may even find ourselves wondering about what it means to be faithful in an age of skepticism.

As we encounter these issues within the Book of Mormon, I expect we will find ourselves arguing with the book's answers much of the time. This is not an uncommon response, however. The book of Jonah argues with the notion of Jewish exclusiveness espoused by Ezra and Nehemiah. The book of Job argues with the piety-prosperity theory espoused by Judges through 2 Kings. The New Testament includes arguments between Paul and James.

These suggestions are admittedly tentative and incomplete. I suspect that the question of scriptural authority can never be finally settled. There is always a sense in which scripture is something more than what we define it to be. We always seem to be adjusting ourselves to scripture because we find that scripture does not always stay within the definitions we set for it.

We are always left with questions, but these questions are not about historicity and authorship. In the end, the questions are not even theological in the strict intellectual sense. The questions are ultimately about commitment and faith. The authority of scripture can never be confined to the realm of intellect alone. It must be an authority which touches the most basic decisions we make about how we choose to live. Nevertheless, the questions remain, and we are obligated to answer them as clearly as we can.

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