

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Even the poem!

I simply had to sit down and write you a note saying that the current issue (Fall 2002) is one of the best in years, a rich mixture of theology, speculation, history, and "personal voices." I especially enjoyed the new stuff [on Joseph Smith] from Price and Taysom, but it was all good, even the sestina.

Gene England would be happy!

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A Post Colonial Mormonism?

I just finished Vol. 35, no. 2 (Fall 2002). The History, Part 3, of *Dialogue*, while a bit dry, documented the reality of independent thinkers and provided faces and feelings for so many issues I had only heard of in rumors. With regard to Duffy and Olaiz's "Correlated Praise: the Development of the Spanish Hymnal," I have often made many of the same observations about the struggle of the international church and the poor assimilation of whatever is good and praiseworthy in other cultures. Of course, as Duffy and Olaiz clearly state, the textual history of a hymnal may be a bit trivial to sustain a criticism of correlation. Still, I too have had my struggles with the unimaginative verse and rhyme of the green

Spanish hymnbook. More importantly, I have also been disoriented by the unquestioned adoption of newer versions as "better translations." I did appreciate the documentation of lost hymns, but the harsh critique should also apply to the filtering of the old red (and brown) English versions in that they too had to be selected and abridged. A good reason to have done so, as Duffy and Olaiz point out, is that the tunes were no longer recognized, and such disuse is a natural consequence of change. Until Spanish-speaking saints develop their own independent (and commercially viable?) alternatives to the official hymnbook, the repressed creativity argued for in the article will remain unattested.

One might make a smaller point about the rationale for eliminating archaic language in the hymns. I don't know how many archaic constructions persist in the English hymnbook, but they certainly abound if only because of our persistence in using a late sixteenth century translation of the scriptures. Spanish LDS practice has not been encumbered by such a tradition. The official version of the Bible was translated by Reina and corrected for the queen by Valera in an even earlier era (1569 according to my LDS acquired Nelson version), but the language was revised and made contemporary in 1862 and then again as recently as 1960. Even more salient is

the fact that the outdated English malapropism of second person usage (thee and thou) also does not apply in present day Spanish, not even in prayer. We Spanish speakers regularly speak to God in the familiar forms (tú, vos, or whatever the dialect allows). We do this commonly in personal prayer, but almost always in public prayer, and, thus, Rocky's modern Philadelphian invocation "Yo, Father" is probably closer to the Spanish language experience. Strange as this may sound to English Mormon ears, it occurs without necessarily decreasing the sense of worshipful respect—the concern most commonly cited for using archaic language in English LDS prayers. One might even speculate that it is this persistence in using non-current forms of English that has misled a younger and a-grammatical generation, as well as impressionable new members, into concluding talks addressed to the congregation with the ubiquitous and vaguely blasphemous "in the name of *thy* son."

I also want to comment on Craig Livingston's "Lions, Brothers, and the Idea of an Indian Nation: The Mexican Revolution in the Minds of Anthony W. Ivins and Rey L. Pratt, 1910-1917." The article seems to have had a hurried editing, but it is a pleasure to see someone document and juxtapose the thinking of two saints in contact with my people. In spite of my great respect for Elder Ivins, I think Livingston could have made his points just as convincingly with a much briefer presentation. As for Rey L. Pratt, perhaps the Mexican saints adored him precisely because he iden-

tified with their views about the revolution, the plight of the poor (Can anyone speak of the true Mexican culture and people without addressing the poor?), and the saving role of the gospel. While Ivins wavered and felt constrained to flip flop his opinions and investment in Mexico, Pratt remained constant and continued to deepen his empathy.

For any Mexican reading this article, there is an obvious omission in the attempt to contextualize the period. Porfirio Diaz and his *científicos* may be viewed as visionary and accepting of international trade and opinion, but the masses in Mexico view him as a despotic traitor, who could not run away fast enough from his Mexican-ness. To even mention him in the article without such qualifiers suggests that either the writer does not understand the current Mexican view or that he subscribes to the American-Mormon-as-foreigner delusion that economic progress justified exploitation of the masses. A similar lack of empathy could be attributed to the author's description of the invasion of Mexico simply as "US arms poured into Veracruz." Mexicans continue carefully to document every intervention by the US, political or religious, and, thus, more people like Pratt and Pierce are sorely needed. The Indian nation is not yet come, and many, like the late Prophet Spencer W. Kimball, still look for the time when the Lamanites shall blossom as a rose. Until they do, the revolution of the gospel will not be fulfilled.

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Beyond Equation

In a classic reduction *ad absurdum* Robert Patterson (Letters, Vol. 35, No. 2) attempts to reduce miracles to a mathematical formula. He postulates that the probability of a miracle taking place $[p(M)]$ is dependent on individual worthiness $[w(I)]$, individual effort $[e(I)]$ and time $[T]$ (millennium in which the miracle occurs), divided by the difficulty of the miracle $[d(M)]$. There are several problems with Patterson's calculus of miracles. For example, some remarkable miracles with a high rate of difficulty take place without the individual being either worthy or exerting effort. One has only to think of Paul on the road to Damascus. The Miracle (the appearance of Christ) would seem to rank high on the difficulty scale (since few in the history of the world have been blessed by such an appearance), and yet Paul was singularly unworthy (having persecuted the saints, including giving silent ascent to the stoning of Stephen); he not only was not exerting effort to make a miracle happen, his entire will was directed against Christ and his kingdom. Thus the miraculous appearance of Christ to Paul just doesn't add up, so to speak, in Patterson's equation.

Another problem with the formula is that it suggests that a miracle is more likely to happen if it has a low as opposed to high difficulty value ("God is more likely to banish the vague aches of arthritis . . . than he is to regrow a severed limb"). There is no validation for such a claim in either scripture or the teachings of modern

prophets. That is, one would wonder, what does it say about a God who would choose to perform lots of easy miracles rather than one difficult one? If, as Gabriel said to Mary, "With God nothing shall be impossible," or, as Jesus said to his disciples, "With God all things are possible" (Matt 19:26), then the degree of difficulty shouldn't be a factor for God.

Another problem with Patterson's formula is the impossibility of our knowing the difficulty or possibility of certain prayed for miracles. That is, mortals may pray for something which they believe is possible but which is not. A painful example would be a homosexual who lives an exemplary life, who has faith, who has received priesthood blessings that, if he has enough faith, God will change him into a heterosexual and who is taught that not only is such a change possible but that God highly desires it. Such a person might meet Patterson's requirements only to be disappointed that a miracle doesn't happen because changing a person's sexual orientation is not something that God does or intends to do. Thus, Patterson's easy formula might well erode rather than confirm a person's faith in miracles.

It is in fact not mathematical certainty but the uncertainty of miracles, their "apparent arbitrariness" and the *apparent* capriciousness of the heavens which require that we have faith that they will happen. As Donald Goddard has written in his book on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "If miracles could be had to order [or by applying a mathematical formula], nothing would be asked of us. We'd acknowledge God's

power and go on unchanged."

A faithful person might well believe that miracles happen, but if she is thoughtful, she will also tend to evaluate claimed miracles in the light of both her faith and her thought. In doing so, she will acknowledge God's infinite power to make miracles happen but at the same time doubt some things that others call miracles. She will also continue to live with the tension caused between the claim that God performs certain seemingly insignificant miracles (helping someone find lost car keys) and God's apparent refusal to stop mad men from slaughtering innocents or his apparent refusal to save millions of people from starving to death or dying of AIDS.

As I have been teaching the New Testament in gospel doctrine class this year, I am struck anew by the beauty and power of Christ's miracles. To demonstrate that he was inaugurating a radical new world order, he showed God's power in a way that it had not been seen in Israel in five hundred years. Thousands flocked to see this new miracles worker, but only a few believed in him beyond the miracles. Three short years later, all of those who followed him to see the miracles abandoned him. They failed to see that the real miracle of his life was that he taught us to believe without miracles, to trust in him in the face of a world gone mad, and to believe that the most important miracle he wrought was making it possible for us to do the hard work of changing our lives through his miraculous atonement.

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Either/Or

Mark Thomas's essay, "Form Criticism of Joseph Smith's 1823 Vision of the Angel Moroni," begins promisingly but disappointingly passes over his promised form-critical analysis of Smith's 1823 vision much too quickly and jumps into a debate over whether or not the vision was real, or at least hallucinated. Rather than analyzing the various sources as one would expect of a form-critical approach, Thomas makes various unsupported assertions about the sources, which makes it impossible for the average reader to assess the validity of his conclusions. This serious gap makes any claim of "multiple attestation," whether true or not, quite meaningless. Vague generalization and conjecture are no substitute for analysis.

Throughout Thomas is uncertain if he is a critic or an apologist, which often leads him to make contradictory assertions. Agreeing with Michael Marquardt and Wesley Walters that Smith made "fundamental" changes to his 1823 vision, particularly his insertion of his own inspired version of Malachi 3-4, Thomas concludes that "Smith placed new words in the mouth of the angel—not to relate history, but to address the theological concerns of Mormonism in 1838" (p. 151). Here Thomas seems willing to admit that Smith consciously added words to address theological concerns, but then he curiously becomes an apologist for Smith when he rejects the idea that Smith intentionally altered his story as "too simplistic" and offers the "more plausible explanation" (rather speculation) that

Smith "simply mixed up his own meditations on scripture with his previous vision" (p. 160). Thomas's first statement is undoubtedly closer to the truth. Being confused about which passages the angel quoted in 1823 is one thing, but to suggest that Smith believed the angel quoted a passage he had just consciously invented to support his and Oliver Cowdery's 1836 vision of Elijah is quite another.

Thomas's major weakness consists in failing to come to terms with his own findings. Thomas suggests that we assess Smith's vision as we would any historical event, or account of an event, that has no witnesses. Normally the wholesale insertion of anachronistic elements is regarded by the historian and trial lawyer as impeachable evidence. Smith's willingness to alter the vision to provide proof for his evolving theology should raise a flag of caution against uncritical acceptance of even the story's historical core. Indeed, historians are under no obligation to regard as true a story that Smith himself freely manipulated.

Nevertheless, Thomas gives what he thinks are two "rational" arguments to support his conclusion that Smith had a real vision (or hallucination). First, he believes Smith "probably did see a vision" because the story is consistent with Smith's "broader social setting" (p. 156). Evidently Thomas assumes that a lie would be otherwise. This *non-sequitur* is accompanied by other fallacious reasoning. His statement that "no historical anachronisms exist in the original core narratives" begs the question since he arrived at the core story by stripping out the

anachronisms. He cites "the tradition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors who claimed to translate a buried ancient text" as somehow lending support to Smith's story, but of the two examples he gives, Solomon Spaulding and a letter written by Jesus, one was fiction while the other was a forgery. His argument that Smith's claimed vision should be given credit since historians do not question the dozens of benign visions experienced by Smith's contemporaries is an *argumentum ad hominem* (circumstantial). To pressure others to accept an argument for fear of being inconsistent says nothing about the validity of that argument. Nevertheless, had Smith's contemporaries intentionally inserted anachronistic material in their accounts for manipulative reasons, the historian would have every right to suspect dishonesty.

The second reason Thomas gives for the verity of Smith's vision is that his mention of repentance is consistent with what one would expect of the "psychological setting" preceding a stress-induced vision (hallucination). While Thomas believes this incidental detail "provides the strongest evidence that Joseph Smith actually had a vision" (p. 156), he weakens his argument by on one hand stating that repentance is a "throw-away detail," while on the other that it is "the common setting for evangelical visions" (p. 157). Regardless, Thomas again assumes that a lie would be otherwise and fails to realize that the same stressors that can drive some individuals to hallucinate can push others to fabricate. Thomas therefore overstates his

case. Moreover, I do not believe the element of repentance fits with the appearance of a treasure-guardian spirit and should probably be considered part of Smith's later manipulations.

Normally, the form critic regards the incompatible elements in a story as later intrusions, but Thomas struggles to harmonize treasure-seeking and "evangelical" Christian elements. Smith's encounter with the spirit of a dead person, for instance, harmonizes with treasure lore but not with the traditional concept of angels as God's special creations. While one might link Smith's 1823 necromantic encounter with white or Christian magic, by no stretch of the imagination can it be described as a "typical evangelical vision. . . [of] an angel" (p. 146). Thus Thomas's analysis is much too simplistic, for Smith did not transform his story from a purely treasure-seeking context to one that was evangelical, but rather from the context of Christian magic to one closer to evangelical orthodoxy.

Thomas also neglects to consider the larger context that motivated Smith's changes. Although changes were already underway, the downplaying of magic and treasure searching evident in Smith's 1834-35 history with Oliver Cowdery and in his 1838-39 history were undoubtedly responses to E. D. Howe's 1834 publication of affidavits that described the coming forth of the Book of Mormon as a continuation of Smith's previous career as a treasure seer. Smith responded not only by removing the folk-magic elements in his account of his 1823 vision but also by misrepresenting his involvement in treasure

searching, describing himself as a disinterested hired hand rather than the seer who directed the treasure searchers where to dig. In fact, Smith never mentions his use of a seer stone, either in treasure searching or translating. These and other manipulations, which go far beyond "performance variations," naturally lead skeptics and historians to doubt whether Smith's claimed vision ever had the integrity of an actual historical event in Smith's mind.

Thomas's conclusion that Smith's story is based on what he euphemistically calls "sense data" implies that it was either real or apparitional (hallucinatory), although strictly speaking only optical vision can provide "sense data." In fact, John Dominic Crossan's thesis to which Thomas refers is that some of the New Testament accounts of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances may have been based on stress-induced hallucination, which is a well-established principle in psychology. However, Thomas's attempt to apply Crossan's stress-hallucination hypothesis to Joseph Smith is nothing new, for it is only a variation of the old unconscious fraud theory first advanced by I. Woodbridge Riley in 1903. Occasionally the theory reappears in the writings of those who do not allow facts to get in the way of a good theory. There are several reasons to reject the unconscious fraud theory but the most conclusive evidence is the plates themselves, as an objective artifact, which Smith allowed his family and friends—even those hostile to his claims (such as Lucy Harris and Isaac Hale)—to handle while covered with a cloth or concealed in a box. The in-

escapable conclusion is that plates were either real or they were fake.

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Translated Correctly!

Earl M. Wunderli's critique makes a number of excellent points and is long overdue. But he fails to raise the most obvious objection to attempts by Sorenson and others to make Book of Mormon "north" into "west" (or some other direction): unlike other translated works, the Book of Mormon was supposedly translated with divine aid, and God himself pronounced the translation correct (D&C 18:2, 17:6). The eighth Article of Faith qualifies Mormon belief in the Bible only so far as it is "translated correctly," but no such qualification applies to the Book of Mormon. Thus, Mormons would seem to be required to believe that the Book of Mormon is indeed "translated correctly." But if some Nephite word meaning "east" or "northeast" were translated into 19th century English as "north," then that would be an incorrect translation.

The same objection, of course, applies to suggestions that the Nephite word translated as "horse" was really a word that meant "deer."

The admission by Sorenson and other LDS scholars that the native

populations of ancient America may have come from Asia as much as eleven thousand years ago also flies in the face of Mormon doctrine relating to the Great Flood, since that Flood had to cover the whole earth, including North America (Noah supposedly lived near modern Missouri) and it wiped out all human beings except Noah's family. That admission seems inconsistent with a belief in the Flood.

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Glossary

Oh, I just love all the new words and phrases I've picked up from the Fall 2002 Dialogue:

"Public memory" amounts to falsehoods presently believed by most members of the church. "Faithful history" is the same thing.

Mark Twain said that a mine was a hole in the ground owned by a liar. A "pseudepigraphist" is the same kind of person who finds an old religious book.

"Limited geography" refers to Indians, yet undiscovered, who have Palestinian ancestors.

And an "affair" amounts to amicable communication between pen pals.

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