

JOSEPH SMITH, THOMAS PAINE, AND MATTHEW 27:51B–53

Grant Adamson

Introduction

Despite its alleged antiquity, jutting back centuries before the Common Era, and its predominant setting in the Americas, the Book of Mormon contains several Matthean and Lukan additions to Mark made in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean. Scholarly consensus in biblical studies today is that the Gospel of Mark was written circa 65 CE, then Matthew and Luke were written in the 70s–90s approximately, and their anonymous authors both expanded and contracted Mark here or there as they reshaped it.¹ One of these add-ons, Matthew 27:51b–53 KJV, describes the earthquake, rent rocks, opened graves, and resurrection of “many bodies of the saints” who “appeared unto many” in the aftermath of the crucifixion and Jesus’ own empty tomb. The retelling of this same story

Many thanks to David Mihalyfy and Taylor Petrey for their feedback on drafts, both rough and polished. David had also teamed up with me on some of the mid-stage research. As I shopped around my polarizing argument, a total of eight reviewers gave advice, some pro, others vehemently contra. Each brought improvements, and any stubborn faults are mine. I presented initial findings at the Fourth biennial Faith and Knowledge Conference, hosted at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington DC, in 2013, with a follow-up in the Latter-day Saints and the Bible section of the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and American Academy of Religion in 2019. My gratitude goes to the organizers at both venues, especially Jason Combs and Jill Kirby, and to Benjamin Park for his generous engagement at the SBL-AAR.

1. For the decline of Matthean priority and for Matthew’s fusion of Mark, other Jesus-material, and the Jewish Bible, see, for example, Carl R. Holladay, *Introduction to the New Testament: Reference Edition* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2017), 193–200.

in the Book of Mormon is no accidental anachronism (Helaman 14:21–25; 3 Nephi 8:6–19, 10:9–10, 23:6–14). It reflects the way that the Book of Mormon intervened in early US debates about the reliability of the Bible.

The chronological priority of the Gospel of Matthew over Mark was still assumed throughout most of the 1800s. But Matthew's added details about the resurrection faced a problem, nevertheless. Commentators had noted that the verses seemed to be missing from Mark and Luke as well as John. What was worse, this and other exegetical observations had been hijacked, and the passage derisively challenged, in Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*; Paine wrote the three installments of the *Age of Reason* in France, but he published the third in New York City, and compendium editions were reprinted there too into the 1820s.² Matthew 27:51b–53 was among the numerous passages in the Bible that Paine attacked. Many Christians felt that all of holy writ was under siege. Joseph Smith, a scrying treasure-hunter from Palmyra, New York, on the Erie Canal, came to the rescue, as did those more qualified. The unlikely apologist did not try to meet reason with more reason in the form of another learned commentary or refutation of the deist "Mr. Paine." Instead Smith shored up revealed religion with more revelation in the form of another bible, one that was recorded by Israelite-American prophets and apostles, then buried in the ground for hundreds of years, and finally translated "by the gift and power of God" (Book of Mormon title page; Testimony of Three Witnesses; see also D&C 1:29, 20:8), hence safe from any manuscript corruption or translation error.³ Smith's solution to the problem of Matthew 27:51b–53 is a prime example of how he endeavored to save the Christian scriptures from skeptics.

On the whole, the biblical apologetic thrust of the Book of Mormon should be obvious (1 Nephi 13:39–40; 2 Nephi 3:11–13; D&C 20:11), and the general thesis, that one of the functions of Smith's text was to defend

2. I will be using one such compendium edition, *The Theological Works of Thomas Paine* (London: R. Carlile; New York: W. Carver, 1824).

3. Quotations are from Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009).

the Old and New Testaments against threats such as deism, is quite widely accepted.⁴ There is also a longstanding tendency, however, for Smith's corroboration of the Bible to be minimized by his text's role as new scripture and its status as blasphemy against the Christian canon (see already 2 Nephi 29).⁵ My contribution builds on the general thesis

4. Robert N. Hullinger, "Joseph Smith, Defender of the Faith," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42, no. 2 (1971): 72–87; Robert N. Hullinger, *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism* (1980; Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), esp. 121–65; Timothy L. Smith, "The Book of Mormon in a Biblical Culture," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 3–21; Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (1991; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11, 27; Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7, 186–91; Heikki Räisänen, "Joseph Smith as a Creative Interpreter of the Bible," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 2 (2010): 68–70, 80–81; David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 144–47; Philip L. Barlow, "To Mend a Fractured Reality: Joseph Smith's Project," *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (2012): 40–41; Grant Hardy, "The Book of Mormon and the Bible," in *Americanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon*, edited by Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 107, 111–13; Daniel O. McClellan, "2 Nephi 25:23 in Literary and Rhetorical Context," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 29 (2020): 15–16.

5. Recently Samuel Morris Brown has recharted much of the same territory that Hullinger had (and without citing Hullinger's article or monograph), but whereas the one saw Smith as a champion of the Bible against deism, the other sees him as being almost in league with skeptics against Protestants. Brown, *Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), esp. 127–61. I think Brown is right about Smith trying to save the Bible; I think Brown is wrong about Smith trying to "kill it" or "light it on fire" in order to do so. For me, the bulk of perceived inimicalness is, first, Smith's allowances to deism and, second, his frustrations with fellow Protestants who would not appreciate what he was doing for the cause of revealed religion. I can sign onto Brown's proviso that Smith and his movement belong "outside the usual binary of Protestants versus freethinkers or religious versus secular" (11), which makes it odd to have Brown then nearly switch the dichotomy and insist that Smith was "an ardent anti-Protestant" (130). Smith may defy categorization, but he was aligned far more closely with biblical apologists than he was with Paine or any other derider of God's word in the KJV and *Textus Receptus*.

and highlights the intricate if gaudy armor Smith hammered out to protect Protestant Christianity against Paine's battering of Matthew 27:51b-53, a passage they and their contemporaries thought was absent from the other gospels—not added to Mark by Matthew—on the venerably wrong assumption that Matthew was the first evangelist and an apostolic eyewitness.⁶

To be explicit about what I myself am postulating, in this article I connect three literary occurrences that stretch from the late 1600s to the early 1800s, namely, (1) the writing and publication of a few influential British commentaries, (2) Paine's theological works, and (3) responses to the "arch-infidel" in England and America including the Book of Mormon.⁷ I understand these occurrences to have a loosely reactionary link, not just a heuristic connection. Whether directly or

6. In the 1920s in an essay that languished for over half a century, B. H. Roberts discretely explored the chance that the prophecy of Samuel the Lamanite and its fulfillment in the Book of Mormon were spurred by the Gospel of Matthew and "other sources" that he figured may have been "available" to Smith, though the source/s eluded him. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, edited by Brigham D. Madsen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 236–38; I thank Colby Townsend for the reference.

7. Within scholarship on Paine, the *Age of Reason*, and its reception, interest has usually dropped off after Paine's lifetime. See, for example, Edward H. Davidson and William J. Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority: The Age of Reason as Religious and Political Idea* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Lehigh University Press, 1994); and Patrick Wallace Hughes, "Antidotes to Deism: A Reception History of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*, 1794–1809" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2013). But that is changing, and in current research, the religious landscape of the early US looks to have been profoundly dotted with deists and skeptics, Paine and others, to whom the faithful were duty-bound to respond generation after generation. See, for example, Mark A. Noll, "Religion in the Early Republic: A Second Tom Paine Effect," *Modern Intellectual History* 14, no. 3 (2017): 883–98; Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Christopher Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

indirectly, the exegetes influenced Paine, who in turn provoked replies. As for Smith, the business of his sources is doubly fraught since he dictated his “translation” of the golden plates in what could be termed an altered state of consciousness while gazing into a folk-magic peep stone. Smith may have regularly relied on memory for his use of the Bible, although hefty quotations from the KJV strongly suggest that he had a copy in front of him now and then.⁸ At any rate, he was not interacting with the KJV in a vacuum; he was also interacting with the Christian and deist thought of his day. How, exactly, Smith was exposed to that thought, as a semi-educated farm laborer and “money digger,” will remain unknown. Much of the exposure may have been face-to-face in verbal exchanges with relatives and acquaintances during the years leading up to his dictation of the Book of Mormon. Even if he was not familiar with the very exegetical and apologetic literature that I cite, it is representative, and his text can be compared and contrasted with it to great value. I push more for Smith’s familiarity with Paine which I think is unavoidable—whether or not he was always aware of responding to him, given the nature of religious experience.⁹

From Biblical Commentaries to the *Age of Reason*

Paine’s challenge to Matthew 27:51b-53 did not come out of nowhere. English exegetes were both interrogating the pericope and defending

8. See, for example, Hardy, “The Book of Mormon and the Bible,” 118–20.

9. For Smith’s schooling, and for the oral composition of his text through sermon techniques, see William Davis, “Reassessing Joseph Smith Jr.’s Formal Education,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 49, no. 4 (2016): 1–58; and William L. Davis, *Visions in a Seer Stone: Joseph Smith and the Making of the Book of Mormon* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020). For the dictation of the Book of Mormon, (half-) altered states of consciousness, (self-induced) hypnotism, and religious experience, see Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), 240–69

it against infidels before him. Paine popularized and also radicalized an ongoing discussion and debate. In the British-American theological culture that Paine (1737–1809) and then Smith (1805–1844) shared, some of the most influential biblical commentaries were those by the Presbyterian nonconformist Matthew Poole (1624–1679), the Arminian Daniel Whitby (1638–1726), the Presbyterian nonconformist Matthew Henry (1662–1714), and the Congregationalist nonconformist Philip Doddridge (1702–1751).¹⁰ They were a mixed bag of potential vulnerability and antagonism to freethought.

It was openly acknowledged in these commentaries that Mark, Luke, and John did not contain any accounts of the Matthean earthquake, rent rocks, opened graves, and resurrected saints at or around Jesus' death. Moreover, a spate of perplexing interpretive issues was discussed but without clear resolution, chiefly who the nameless saints were, who saw them, whether they were raised from the dead prior to or following the resurrection of Jesus, and whether they had ascended to heaven or re-entered the ground to await the eschaton.¹¹

10. Twists and turns of publication and reprinting are beyond my scope, particularly since the annals for the commentaries are wonderfully cluttered with postmortem completions, enlargements, and reconfigurations. But as a signal of lasting influence and of shared British-American theological culture, the volumes of Samuel Austin Allibone's *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature, and British and American Authors . . .* (Philadelphia: Childs and Peterson; J.B. Lippincott, 1858–1871) should suffice. Poole, Whitby, Henry, and Doddridge are endorsed there along with Richard Watson, Elias Boudinot, Thomas Scott, Adam Clarke, Samuel Thomas Bloomfield, and even William Wisner, whom I will be citing. Allibone also had entries on Paine and the literary "impostor" Smith, though he did not recommend either.

11. Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible; . . . The More Difficult Terms in Each Verse are Explained, Seeming Contradictions Reconciled, Questions and Doubts Resolved, and the Whole Text Opened* (repr., New York: R. Carter, 1853), 3:141–42; Daniel Whitby, *A Paraphrase and Commentary on the New Testament; repr. in A Critical Commentary and Paraphrase on the Old and New Testament and the Apocrypha, by Patrick, Lowth, Arnald, Whitby, and Lowman*, edited by J. R. Pitman (London: R. Priestley, 1822), 5:222; Matthew

The exegetes also had to fight off incredulity about Matthew's unique account. As Henry described the problematic passage: "This matter is not related so fully as our curiosity would wish; for the scripture was not intended to gratify that; . . . We may raise many inquiries concerning it, which we cannot resolve . . ." In sum: "We must not covet to be wise above what is written. The relating of this matter so briefly, is a plain intimation to us, that we must not look that way for a confirmation of our faith."¹² Henry's disapproval of curiosity and covetous wisdom was a tacit reply to probing rationalist critiques at the dawn of the Enlightenment, and his disclosure that Christian belief might need to be confirmed was an involuntary admission of their vigor.¹³ Doddridge, in his commentary, did not resort to laments. He struck back and was pleased to say that "a deist lately travelling through Palestine was converted, by viewing one of these rocks," that is, the rent rocks of Matthew 27:51b, "which still remains torn asunder, not in the weakest place, but cross the veins; a plain proof that it was done in a supernatural manner."¹⁴

This was the stage onto which British expatriate Thomas Paine stepped as the first two parts of his *Age of Reason* were published in 1794 and 1795. He challenged Matthew 27:51b–53 in the second part, turning

Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament . . . with Practical Remarks and Observations* (repr., New York: R. Carter, 1827), 4:288; Philip Doddridge, *The Family Expositor; Or, A Paraphrase and Version of the New Testament, with Critical Notes, and a Practical Improvement of Each Section* (repr., Charlestown, Mass.: S. Etheridge, 1807), 2:555.

12. Henry, *Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, 4:288.

13. See Henry, *Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, 4:iv.

14. Doddridge, *Family Expositor*, 2:555. Doddridge got the anecdote from Robert Fleming who heard it from "a worthy Gentleman" on the tour with the deist. Fleming, *Christology, A Discourse Concerning Christ . . .* (London: A. Bell, 1707), 2:97–98 note c.

the observations of the biblical commentators against them at length.¹⁵ Paine devoted more space to those few verses than almost any others from the Old or New Testament. He began with the silence of the rest of the evangelists. Confusing Mark and Luke as apostles, he thought they and John could not have ignored the earthquake and the rending of the rocks; they had to be there with Matthew. More momentous was what happened after the tremor:

An earthquake is always possible, and natural, and proves nothing; but this opening of the graves is supernatural, and in point to their doctrine, their cause, and their apostleship. Had it been true, it would have filled up whole chapters of those books, and been the chosen theme, and general chorus of all the writers; but instead of this, little and trivial things, and mere prattling conversations of, he said this, and she said that, are often tediously detailed, while this most important of all, had it been true, is passed off in a slovenly manner, by a single dash of the pen, and that by one writer only, and not so much as hinted at by the rest.¹⁶

Paine then satirized the interpretive issues surrounding the appearance of the awakened dead in Matthew 27:52–53. He accused the first evangelist of being a liar and a poor one at that:

The writer of the book of Matthew should have told us who the saints were that came to life again, and went into the city, and what became of them afterwards, and who it was that saw them; for he is not hardy enough to say that he saw them himself;—whether they came out naked, and all in natural buff, he-saints and she-saints; . . . whether they

15. Although Paine wrote parts one and two in France, where he was incarcerated, for the writing of the second part he was out of jail and living in the Paris home of US ambassador James Monroe. Under those conditions, he could have had ready access to a sizable English library as well as French books, to say nothing of his prior learning in England and America. See Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 54–69, 105–7; Hughes, “Antidotes to Deism,” 35–48, 58–64; J. C. D. Clark, *Thomas Paine: Britain, America, and France in the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 339–47.

16. *Theological Works of Thomas Paine*, 132–33.

remained on earth, and followed their former occupations of preaching or working; or whether they died again, or went back to their graves alive, and buried themselves.

Strange indeed, that an army of saints should return to life, and nobody know who they were, nor who it was that saw them, and that not a word more should be said upon the subject, nor these saints have any thing to tell us! Had it been the prophets who (as we are told) had formerly prophesied of these things, they must have had a great deal to say. They could have told us everything, and we should have had posthumous prophecies, with notes and commentaries upon the first, a little better at least than we have now. Had it been Moses, and Aaron, and Joshua, and Samuel, and David, not an unconverted Jew had remained in all Jerusalem. Had it been John the Baptist, and the saints of the times then present, every body would have known them, and they would have out-preached and out-famed all the other apostles. But instead of this, these saints are made to pop up like Jonah's gourd in the night, for no purpose at all, but to wither in the morning. Thus much for this part of the story.¹⁷

Paine's challenge merged a large dose of mockery and a swift indictment for lying. But the two main features of his critique were already in the commentaries. First was the trouble of the missing earthquake, rent rocks, opened graves, and resurrected saints, all absent from Mark, Luke, and John. Second was the trouble of the limited information in Matthew, yielding the inquiries of who the awakened dead were, whom they appeared to, and where they went after their appearance.

The skeptic did not just exacerbate a well-known exegetical problem, however. He also maintained, with a jeer, that if the risen saints were to be identified among the prophets and other heroes of the Old Testament, one of the options in the commentaries, there should be "posthumous prophecies" on record from these pre-Christians. Paine developed this more earnestly when he augmented the first two parts of his *Age of Reason* with a third, under the title *Examination of the Passages in the New Testament, Quoted from the Old, and Called Prophecies*

17. *Theological Works of Thomas Paine*, 133–34.

Concerning Jesus Christ. It was published in New York City in 1807. As he rejected centuries of christological veiling over Jewish scripture, all the way back to the Gospel of Matthew's fulfillment citations, Paine inadvertently called for a retro-prophecy of the events in Matthew 27:51b-53 and of the darkness in Mark as well:

Matthew concludes his book by saying, that when Christ expired on the cross, the rocks rent, the graves opened, and the bodies of many of the saints arose; and Mark says there was darkness over the land from the fifth hour until the ninth. They produce no prophesy [*sic*] for this. But had these things been facts, they would have been a proper subject for prophesy, because none but an almighty power could have inspired a fore knowledge of them, and afterwards fulfilled them. Since, then, there is no such prophesy . . . , the proper deduction is, there were no such things, and that the book of Matthew is fable and falsehood.¹⁸

Paine's full critique of Matthew, then, hinged not only on the lack of multiple attestation for the evangelist's individual claims, nor solely on the questions of the identity of the resurrected saints and so forth, but also on the fact that, unlike Matthew's fulfillment citations, these events were not supported by Old Testament prophecy. To be sure, Paine did not believe any Jewish scripture had been fulfilled in the life of Jesus. He did not expect anyone to compose the wanting prognostication for Matthew 27:51b-53 either. That is what happened, though, some twenty years later, when another resident of New York, Joseph Smith, dictated the Book of Mormon as a translation of prophetic records from the ancient Americas, imagined to be Israelite-Christian. Smith's text would present a partial solution to the tripartite problem.¹⁹

18. *Theological Works of Thomas Paine*, 241.

19. It was also in France that Paine wrote (much of) the third installment/s of the *Age of Reason*, before returning to America in 1802, but he waited another half decade to publish his *Examination of the Passages*. See Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 102–103; Hughes, "Antidotes to Deism," 77–87; Clark, *Enlightenment and Revolution*, 349. Bringing the 1794, 1795, and 1807 installments together, compendium editions were reprinted in New York during

Responses to Paine before Smith

The *Age of Reason* was widely discussed. Between the publication of its three installments and the publication of the Book of Mormon, scores of biblical commentators and other defenders of holy writ were replying to Paine. The vast majority of them were responding to the first two installments, not the third, and only a portion sought to answer his challenge to the passage in Matthew 27: the Anglican Richard Watson (1737–1816), Bishop of Llandaff, Wales; the outwardly Anglican but inwardly evangelical Thomas Scott (1747–1821); and the Presbyterian Elias Boudinot (1740–1821), a US politician and future head of the American Bible Society.²⁰ Their responses are valuable for the contrast they provide to Smith as much as for the comparanda.

Smith's residence. Most fascinating is the edition of a couple thousand copies done in New York City in 1825, sponsored by an associate and ally of Paine. Apprehensive about reprisals, the printer feigned to be operating in London, but buyers hardly worried, and the copies sold quickly. See "John Fellows to Thomas Jefferson," Oct. 3, 1825, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mtjbib025537>; also referenced in Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith*, 535n47. A slightly earlier compendium edition, the one that I have been using, was printed jointly in London and New York City with no US trepidation: *The Theological Works of Thomas Paine* (London: R. Carlile; New York: W. Carver, 1824).

20. Watson's response to the first and second installments prompted Paine's third. For more on Watson, Scott, and Boudinot, see Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 90–91, 106, 114–15; Holland, *Sacred Borders*, 81–83, 106–7; Eric R. Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 53–56, 62–63; Eran Shalev, *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013), 126–133; Hughes, "Antidotes to Deism," 186–91, 203–4, 259–60, 311–12, 326, 330; David Francis Mihalyfy, "Heterodoxies and the Historical Jesus: Biblical Criticism of the Gospels in the U.S., 1794–1860" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2017), 70–81; Clark, *Enlightenment and Revolution*, 348–52; Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith*, 194, 218, 550n43; and Elizabeth Fenton, "Nephites and Israelites: *The Book of Mormon* and the Hebraic Indian Theory," in Fenton and Hickman, *Americanist Approaches*, 283–87.

About Paine's contention that there should be more accounts of the opened graves and resurrected saints besides Matthew's, Bishop Watson assumed Matthean priority and said that the "omission" of events by the second and third evangelists "does not prove, that they were either ignorant of them, or disbelieved them." The other synoptic writers' selective retelling of Matthew 27 may be explained from their different audiences and purposes. If the people to whom the saints had appeared were themselves alive when Matthew wrote, subsequently they may have been deceased when Mark and Luke came to write—no need to reiterate the appearance, then. As for the fourth gospel, it was intentionally "supplemental." Furthermore, the bishop averred, Matthew could not have been mendacious because the Jews he was writing to witnessed what did and did not transpire in Jerusalem; he could not have risked being constantly confronted, so the earthquake, rent rocks, opened graves, and resurrected saints had to be the truth.²¹ Scott applied similar logic to Mark, Luke, and John: "Matthew is generally allowed to have written before the other evangelists; had they not therefore credited his account of the miracles attending Christ's death, they would have contradicted it: for the circumstances he related were of so extraordinary and public a nature, that they could not have escaped detection, had they been false."²² Boudinot likewise stated the events were "capable of immediate contradiction and refutation, had they not been known to be true."²³

21. Richard Watson, *An Apology for the Bible, In a Series of Letters Addressed to Thomas Paine, author of a Book entitled, The Age of Reason . . .* (New York: J. Bull, 1796), 156–61.

22. Thomas Scott, *A Vindication of the Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, and of the Doctrines Contained in Them: Being an Answer to the Two Parts of Mr. T. Paine's Age of Reason* (New York: G. Forman, 1797), 109; see also 105–6.

23. Elias Boudinot, *The Age of Revelation. Or, The Age of Reason Shown to Be an Age of Infidelity* (Philadelphia: A. Dickins, 1801), 196.

About Paine's contention that the Matthean account of the awakened dead itself should be longer, Watson affirmed:

You amuse yourself . . . and are angry with Matthew for not having told you a great many things . . . ; but if he had gratified your curiosity in every particular, I am of opinion that you would not have believed a word of what he had told you. I have no curiosity on the subject: . . . If I durst indulge myself in being wise above what is written, I must be able to answer many of your inquiries relative to these saints; but I dare not touch the ark of the Lord, I dare not support the authority of the scripture by the boldness of conjecture.²⁴

The bishop was shifting ownership of the inquiries from the exegetes to Paine and taking a page out of Henry's commentary with its disapproval of overly curious freethinkers. Speculation on the identity of the saints and so forth in the commentaries had become a liability that Paine exploited. Accordingly, Watson retreated to the position that asking to know too much was sinful. He cast Paine as petulantly brazen, whereas he himself was satisfied with the amount of information the apostle Matthew, or rather God, had given. Scott followed suit: Paine's questions were "degrading" of scripture, as if the arch-infidel did not get cues from previous biblical commentators.²⁵ Boudinot said nothing of the interpretive issues per se, but he amplified Watson's point. Not only would Paine have no faith in Matthew regardless of the evangelist's specificity on the resurrected saints, he would be suspicious of the risen Lord too. Boudinot chastened and summoned him to repent for disbelieving the scriptural warrants that Jesus was the messiah—for instance, "the rending of the rocks (to be seen at this day)," a parenthetical allusion to the anecdote of the deist converted in the holy land. Then Boudinot stressed Paine's pride and skepticism hyperbolically: "For although Christ had appeared after his resurrection to every man in Jerusalem, nay even to all the then world, on the principle advanced in

24. Watson, *Apology for the Bible*, 159.

25. Scott, *Vindication of Divine Inspiration*, 110.

the Age of Reason, our author would not have been obliged to believe, because he himself had not seen him. But if the divine Saviour should even now appear to him," Boudinot quipped, "as he did to another unbelieving Thomas, and show him his hands and his sides, I have as great doubts of his assent to the truths of the Gospel, as the disciples had of the Jews, who refused equal evidence."²⁶

Together, these educated elites resorted to summersaults of intelligence in order to explain the missing material, and they contended that neither an increase in information from Matthew nor in revelation from Jesus would be effective because of Paine's bottomless skepticism. The unlearned Joseph Smith was more commonsensical than Watson, Scott, or Boudinot on this tally. In a concession to the skeptic, he would simply blame Jesus' other disciples for forgetting to record the appearance and ministry of the saints. And the translator of the gold bible would exhibit scarcely any satisfaction with the limited information in canonical verse. In the Book of Mormon, the resurrected Jesus would appear to the Amerindians, not for the sake of rhetorical device, but in an alternate reality of salvation history, while deists would be vanquished at last, or so Smith grew to fantasize.²⁷

26. Boudinot, *Age of Revelation*, 195–98.

27. As the young prophet may have been cognizant of, a multipronged threat to Matthew 27:51b–53 was emerging. In addition to the skeptical Paine, there were liberal German Protestant critics on the horizon, with their insidious ideas about interpolations from apocryphal gospels and their budding program of demythologization. What is more, there were commentators such as Adam Clarke in Anglophone countries aiding and abetting German critics of this "skeptical school," to the disappointment of their countrymen such as Samuel Thomas Bloomfield. See Clarke, *The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments . . .* (repr., New York: N. Bangs and J. Emory, 1825), 4:258; Bloomfield, *Recensio Synoptica Annotationis Sacrae: Being a Critical Digest and Synoptical Arrangement of the Most Important Annotations on the New Testament, Exegetical, Philological, and Doctrinal . . .* (London: C. and J. Rivington, 1826), 1:522–55. For Smith's potential use of Clarke, either in the Book of Mormon or his other writings, see, for example, Davis, *Visions in a Seer Stone*, 42–44, 174–75, 208n57 and the studies listed there.

The Smiths and the *Age of Reason* in Vermont and New York

Paine's biting critique of revelation and revealed religion affected the Smith family, like other Americans. Per Lucy Mack Smith, the mother of Joseph Smith Jr., her Universalist father-in-law Asael so severely recommended the *Age of Reason* that in a disagreement over Methodism, Asael hurled a copy of it at her husband, Joseph Sr., and "angrily bade him read it until he believed it."²⁸ That was when the Smiths were living in Vermont. There is some indication, although from a hostile source, that Joseph Sr. may have acted on the endorsement and gone past what Asael hoped. The Green Mountain Boys, who supposedly knew Joseph Sr., later described him as having frequently said "that the whole bible [*sic*] was the work of priestcraft . . . , that Voltairs writings was [*sic*] the best bible then extant, and Thomas Paines age of reason [*sic*], the best commentary."²⁹

Whatever the state of affairs with Joseph Sr. in Vermont before the family relocated to New York, and whatever lasting talks about Universalism and freethought the Smiths might have had as Joseph Jr. passed his adolescence in Palmyra, the *Age of Reason* was a documented topic of conversation in the village. For example, a newspaper column on "The Effects of Infidelity" was printed in the *Palmyra Register* in 1820, when Joseph Jr. was a religiously anxious minor:

The following anecdote was related about eight[een] years ago in a sermon preached by the Rev. Alphonsus Gunn [1760–1806], at Lothbury Church [in London]. "I was lately (observed Mr. Gunn) called on

28. Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 291; also referenced in Jan Ships, *Mormonism: The Story of A New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 8; Hullinger, *Smith's Response*, 35–36, 43n4; Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 25–26, 567n60; Holland, *Sacred Borders*, 144, 170n52.

29. "Green Mountain Boys to Thomas C. Sharp," Feb. 15, 1844, in *Early Mormon Documents*, edited by Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books), 1:597.

to attend the death-bed of a young man at Hoxton [in East London]. On my entering the room, I found him in the greatest agony of mind. Thinking, perhaps, that it arose from that deep remorse sometimes attendant on the death bed of a sinner, I began to point him to Jesus, the Sinner's only friend, and to the glorious promises of the Gospel. When, with an agonizing look of despair, he replied, 'Ah! Sir, but I have rejected the Gospel. Some years since, I unhappily read Paine's Age of Reason; it suited my corrupt understanding; I imbibed its principles; after this, wherever I went, I did all that lay in my power to hold up the Scriptures to contempt; by this means I led others into the fatal snare, and made proselytes to infidelity. Thus I rejected God, and now he rejects me, and will have no mercy upon me.' I offered to pray by him, but he replied, 'O, no, it is in vain to pray for me!' then with a dismal groan cried out, 'Paine's Age of Reason has ruined my soul,' and instantly expired."³⁰

Long after his own demise in New York City in 1809, the skeptic was still haunting both sides of the Atlantic. Britain and the US were not so distant from one another, the reported concerns of metropolitan churchmen in England from farming life in up-state New York. This column originated in a London-based periodical; within a year, it was in the Palmyra news.³¹

The tale of the despairing deist was not the last of Paine's press coverage there. In 1826, another Palmyra newspaper, the *Wayne Sentinel*, printed a "Letter from Dr. [Benjamin] Franklin to Thomas Payne" about a draft of his that Franklin had read and counselled him to destroy for the sake of the youth, whose commitment to morality would not endure if he were to publicize his views on religion: "I would

30. *Palmyra Register*, July 12, 1820; also referenced in Hullinger, *Smith's Response*, 38, 45n24. The "effects of infidelity" are analogous in the Book of Mormon, though the outcome is not always so bleak. See Jacob 7:1–23; Mosiah 26–27; Alma 11:21–12:7, 15:3–12, 30:6–60.

31. *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* 27 (Nov. 1819): 455. Before and after its printing in the *Palmyra Register*, the column was printed in the *Washington Wig* (Bridgeton, N.J.), July 10, 1820, and the *Republican Compiler* (Gettysburg, Pa.), July 26, 1820.

advise you,” Franklin had penned to an unspecified recipient, “not to attempt unchaining the tiger, but to burn this piece before it is seen by any other person.”³² Further newspapers in the state and elsewhere did more than imply that the letter was about Paine’s infamous title; they prefixed stories to it asserting that the draft Franklin read was in fact the *Age of Reason*.³³ New York divine William Wisner (1782–1871) enlarged the stories into a pamphlet, “Don’t Unchain the Tiger,” amid the many anti-deist ephemera of the 1820s and ’30s.³⁴

Reverend Wisner himself spent the first half of the 1800s preaching across the western portion of the state and may well have visited Palmyra. In his memoirs, he related exchange after exchange with Universalists, infidels, male and female alike, even the rare atheist, and he told of denouncing the evils of freethought to his congregations. In one city, he organized an “infidel Bible class” by inviting the local deists and skeptics to supply him with written cases against scripture and in favor of skepticism. He then would read them aloud and dismantle them in front of his parishioners. The infidels also attended, and he kept the

32. *Wayne Sentinel*, Aug. 4, 1826; also referenced in Hullinger, *Smith’s Response*, 39, 45n26. The paper was not the first to print the letter or have it addressed to Paine. It ran years before in the *Republican Compiler* (Gettysburg, Pa.), Nov. 15, 1820, without any proposal of addressee. It was printed once more in the *Adams Sentinel* (Gettysburg, Pa.), July 12, 1826, as a “Letter from Dr. Franklin to Thomas Paine.”

33. *Western Sun and General Advertiser* (Vincennes, Ind.), Sept. 16, 1826; *Black River Gazette* (Lowville, N.Y.), June 9, 1830; *Wabash Courier* (Terre-Haute, Ind.), Sept. 26, 1833.

34. The date of the tract cannot be pinpointed, not even when it was anthologized: *Tracts of the American Tract Society* 8, no. 280. For Wisner’s authorship, see the *Ninth Annual Report of the American Tract Society . . .* (New York: F. Fanshaw, 1834), 14, wherein that reporting cycle alone the society printed 122,000 copies of it (p. 20). For its circulation and importance, see also “Don’t Unchain the Tiger: One of the Prize Tracts of the American Tract Society,” *Christian Advocate and Journal* (Chicago, Ill.) 8 no. 6 (Oct. 4, 1833): 21.

weekly class going a full season.³⁵ In another town, he sermonized on “the influence of infidelity upon the moral character and happiness of men in this world,” and to demonstrate he outlined Paine’s rise and fall. Afterward, he ascertained that “one of the young men who heard it . . . had been an admirer of the ‘*Age of Reason*’ and had adopted the sentiments of its author, but had gone home from hearing the sermon and burnt the book, and had taken up his neglected Bible to learn what he must do to be saved.”³⁶ These vignettes, though packaged for consumption as literature, were nonetheless indicative of the revivalist atmosphere in western New York, as it was recalled by one Presbyterian reverend, for whom all Universalists were on the brink of spiritual ruin. In sum, the revivals were not only competitions between this or that style of Christianity; they were also battles against rural deism and skepticism.³⁷

Western New Yorkers who read the Franklin correspondence in the papers or in the many thousands of copies of Wisner’s pamphlet could not have known that the letter itself was left unaddressed, and that it was not about the *Age of Reason*, which Paine wrote several years after Franklin died in 1790.³⁸ Paine’s promoters caught the miscalculation and decried the pamphlet, even the letter, as “fraud” and “forgery.”³⁹

35. William Wisner, *Incidents in the Life of a Pastor* (New York: C. Scribner, 1851), 82–85.

36. Wisner, *Life of a Pastor*, 312.

37. For his description of the revivals as such, see Wisner, *Life of a Pastor*, esp. 271–83.

38. Albert Henry Smyth, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin, Collected and Edited with a Life and Introduction* (1907; New York: Haskell House, 1970), 9:520–22.

39. “Don’t Unchain the Tiger,” *Free Enquirer* (New York) 1 no. 44 (Nov. 2, 1834): 352; “Don’t Unchain the Tiger,” *Western Examiner* (St. Louis, Miss.) 1 no. 23 (Dec. 1, 1834): 182; Calvin Blanchard, *The Life of Thomas Paine . . .* (New York: C. Blanchard, 1860), 73–74; Joseph N. Moreau, *Testimonials to the Merits of Thomas Paine . . .* (Boston: J. P. Mendum, 1874), 53–56.

But this was likely inconsequential to most. It was too alluring to have Franklin, the very person who sponsored Paine's emigration to America, also repudiate his writing and call for the burning of the *Age of Reason*. Joseph Smith Jr. did one much better by having an ancient prophet and the resurrected Jesus respond to him nearly two millennia ago.⁴⁰

The Book of Mormon qua Rejoinder to Paine

In 1827, the year after Franklin's letter "to Thomas Payne" was printed in the *Wayne Sentinel*, Smith acquired or fabricated the golden plates, if they ever existed other than as visionary objects, and he began to translate them.⁴¹ One of the ancient Amerindian prophets and apostles within their cast of characters is Samuel the Lamanite. In Smith's text, the Lamanites, named for Laman, the disobedient son of Lehi and brother of Nephi, are said to be the iniquitous branch of the Native

40. About fictive stories, it is worth noting that in a response to Paine's *Examination of the Passages*, one apologist, John B. Colvin, defended the New Testament and Christianity as a noble lie: if all scripture were phony, that would not invalidate the religion "because the 'faith' of a christian [*sic*] rests not so much on the genuineness of the books that contain his creed, as upon the correctness of the doctrines which they teach." Colvin, *An Essay Towards an Exposition of the Futility of Thomas Paine's Objections to the Christian Religion . . .* (Baltimore: Fryer and Rider, 1807), 5.

41. Acquired: If while scrying and treasure hunting Smith did discover something buried in the ground, as he said, it was not what he thought it was. Fabricated: For the both/and position that without being a fraud Smith himself 'materialized' the plates in an act akin to the ritual of transubstantiation, see Ann Taves, "History and the Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Gold Plates," *Numen* 61, no. 2/3 (2014): 182–207; and Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 50–65. For other purported discoveries and translations of ancient texts within the genre of "pseudobiblicism" in the US, see Shalev, *American Zion*, 108–10; and Shalev, "An American Book of Chronicles: Pseudo-Biblicism and the Cultural Origins of *The Book of Mormon*," in Fenton and Hickman, *Americanist Approaches*, 145–46.

Americans “cursed” by God with “black” or “dark” skin, whereas the other branch, the righteous Nephites, the scriptural record keepers, are “white,” “fair,” and “delightful,” except for interludes when the racist trope is inverted to an extent (see 1 Nephi 12:23, 13:15; 2 Nephi 5:21, 30:6–7; Jacob 3:5–9; Enos 1:20; Words of Mormon 1:8; Alma 3:5–12; 3 Nephi 2:15–16; 4 Nephi 1:10; Mormon 5:15–24; Moroni 9:12). At the close of the first century BCE, Samuel preaches to the backsliding Nephites. His Lamanite standing and that of other dark-skinned proselytes serves to underscore the hardheartedness and disbelief of the paler visages.⁴²

Samuel prophesies of their doom if they do not repent, and he predicts several signs that will punctuate the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus—whose ministry the dwindling ranks of faithful Amerindians have been awaiting with conspicuous detail since their Nephite and Lamanite ancestors vacated Jerusalem and sailed to the Americas. Samuel declares that at the incarnation there will be a day with no night: “And behold, there shall be a new star arise, such an one as ye never have beheld” (Helaman 14:5; cf. Matthew 2:1–12).⁴³ Then he pronounces that at the crucifixion there will be the opposite, the

42. For sustained assessments of the racial dynamics in Smith’s text, which can be quite sympathetic in a number of passages, see, for example, Jared Hickman, “*The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse*,” *American Literature* 86, no. 3 (2014): 429–61; Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 31–59; and Kimberly M. Berkey and Joseph M. Spencer, “‘Great Cause to Mourn’: The Complexity of *The Book of Mormon’s* Presentation of Gender and Race,” in Fenton and Hickman, *Americanist Approaches*, 298–320.

43. The New World equivalent of the Matthean star was featured in Elias Boudinot’s writing about the Indians as Israelites; in Smith’s text it becomes literal, but there it had been metaphoric. Boudinot, *A Star in the West; Or, A Humble Attempt to Discover the Long Lost Ten Tribes of Israel . . .* (Trenton, N.J.: D. Fenton, S. Hutchinson, and J. Dunham, 1816), i–ii; see also Shalev, *American Zion*, 127.

darkness that Paine doubted.⁴⁴ The Lamanite prophet ups the ante from three hours in the synoptic gospels (e.g., Matthew 27:45) to three days, saying that the light will vanish when Jesus expires on the cross and will only be seen again at his resurrection (Helaman 14:20).⁴⁵ Samuel also predicts the Matthean earthquake, rent rocks, opened graves, and resurrected saints, the final components of the retro-prophecy that Paine had unwittingly called for:

And the earth shall shake and tremble. And the rocks which is [*sic*] upon the face of the earth, which is both above the earth and beneath, which ye know at this time is solid—or the more part of it is one solid mass—shall be broken up. Yea, they shall be rent in twain and shall ever after be found in seams and in cracks and in broken fragments upon the face of the whole earth, yea, both above the earth and beneath. And behold, there shall be great tempests. And there shall be many

44. A generation prior to Paine, the three hours of darkness at the crucifixion had been challenged by Edward Gibbon, historian of the later Roman Empire. Watson wrote the most successful reply to Gibbon, in which the bishop met the historian half-way, rationalizing but still defending scripture. By the early 1800s, Watson's responses to Gibbon and Paine were reprinted together; see, for example, Richard Watson, *Two Apologies: One for Christianity, in a Series of Letters Addressed to Edward Gibbon, Esq.; the Other for the Bible, in Answer to Thomas Paine . . .* (London: Scatcherd and Letterman, 1820), 95–102. Smith, in contradistinction to the rationalizing Watson, doubled down on the darkness.

45. In Smith's text, Jesus is the Johannine "light and life of the world" (3 Nephi 9:18; cf. John 1:4–5, 3:19, 6:33, 8:12, 9:5), so there is darkness while he is dead and entombed. In the synoptic gospels, however, the three hours of darkness occur as Jesus is on the cross, before his death. For a variety of Johannine elements within the gold bible and Smith's revelations, see Krister Stendahl, "The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi," in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judeo-Christian Parallels*, edited by Truman G. Madsen (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 139–54; Nicholas J. Frederick, *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity* (Maddison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016); and Nicholas J. Frederick and Joseph M. Spencer, "John 11 in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception* 5, no. 1 (2018): 44–87.

mountains laid low like unto a valley. And there shall be many places which are now called valleys which shall become mountains whose height thereof is great. And many highways shall be broken up; and many cities shall become desolate. And many graves shall be opened and shall yield up many of their dead; and many saints shall appear unto many. (Helaman 14:21–25)

To bolster his prognostication, Samuel informs the Nephites that he has received it from one of God's heavenly messengers: "And the angel said unto me that many shall see greater signs than these, to the intent that they might believe—that these signs and these wonders should come to pass upon all the face of this land, to the intent that there shall be no cause for unbelief among the children of men—and this," Samuel cautions, "to the intent that whosoever will believe might be saved and that whosoever will not believe, a righteous judgement might come upon them; and also if they are condemned, they bring upon themselves their own condemnation" (Helaman 14:26–29). When Samuel concludes his sermon, the Lamanite prophet is rejected by most of the Nephites, who are violently apostate, so he runs away to "his own country" where he teaches "his own people" (Helaman 16:1–7).

At the turn of the era, as the messianic passages in Nephite scripture are finally being fulfilled, and as Samuel's prophecy of the sign of the incarnation is about to be accomplished, some believe; others do not. The skeptical Nephites plan to murder the faithful if the day with no night does not happen. It does, and the Matthean birth star shines forth, but that is not enough to convince everyone (3 Nephi 1:4–23). Thirty years later, once more there are "great doubtings and disputations" about the prophesied signs of the crucifixion and resurrection (3 Nephi 8:4). In a reversal of the past episode, God/Jesus sends catastrophes to slay the wicked for their unbelief. The lethal quaking of the earth and rending of the rocks lasts three hours, the darkness three days, as witnessed by myriad survivors. Cities are destroyed. With more than a touch of revenge fantasy, the earthquake and other wrathfully

providential natural disasters serve to punish the evil doubters and disputants (3 Nephi 8:5–10:14).

Regarding the opened graves and the appearance of the resurrected saints in the Americas, the fulfillment of that key aspect of Samuel's prophecy is not narrated, but it does receive the highest certification from the risen Jesus himself when the light returns and he appears to the survivors of the earthquake. Like so many semi-doubting Thomases, he invites them to examine the wounds in his side, hands, and feet (3 Nephi 11:12–15).⁴⁶ He stays with them a while, and during his post-resurrection ministry to the Amerindians, he picks twelve disciples and checks the Nephite scriptures for completeness.⁴⁷ Looking at their records, Jesus says to his New World apostles: "I commanded my servant Samuel the Lamanite that he should testify unto this people that at the day that the Father should glorify his name in me that there were many saints which should arise from the dead and should appear unto many and should minister unto them." Perturbed, he asks: "Were [*sic*]

46. Paine had discussed the New Testament witnesses of the resurrection, the reluctant and doubting Thomas among them (*Theological Works*, 34–35, 136–137). As stated in the first and second parts of the *Age of Reason*, the quantity was low and the evidence insufficient, being restricted to one corner of the world. Smith's text spans both sides of the globe and multiplies the witnesses exponentially to some 2,500 people (3 Nephi 17:25). See also Hullinger (*Smith's Response*, 49, 145–46), Holland (*Sacred Borders*, 146–47), and Brown (*Smith's Translation*, 142–44) on the Book of Mormon and the regionalism of the Bible.

47. Paine had discussed the foundation of Christianity too (*Theological Works*, 43–44). As stated in the first part of the *Age of Reason*, Jesus was Jewish and did not found "a new religion" or "new system," unlike Moses and Muhammed, who did: Christianity was devised by the authors of the New Testament and other "mythologists" who palmed it off on Jesus. But in Smith's text, after Jesus calls the twelve, he teaches them to baptize, to bless the bread and wine of communion, and he gives them other ecclesiological instructions, even informing them what the name of the church should be (3 Nephi 11:18–41, 18:1–16, 27:1–12). See also Brown (*Smith's Translation*, 158–60) on the Book of Mormon, Protestant factions, and the hitch of "Getting from Bible to Church."

it not so?" The disciples attest: "Yea, Lord, Samuel did prophesy according to thy words, and they were all fulfilled." Jesus goes on to reproach them: "How be it that ye have not written this thing?—that many saints did arise and appear unto many and did minister unto them." Then Smith's narrator editorializes: one of the disciples "remembered that this thing had not been written. And it came to pass that Jesus commanded that it should be written. Therefore it was written according as he commanded" (3 Nephi 23:9–13).

Jesus is not checking for the completeness of the Nephite scriptures but rather the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John. He already knows the fulfillment of the key aspect of Samuel's prophecy is missing from the Amerindian bible before he commands his disciples to record it. Without having seen the Nephite records, he says to them: "Behold, other scriptures I would that ye should write that ye have not" (3 Nephi 23:6). Obviously, Jesus' omniscience covers the contents of the New Testament gospels as well, where Matthew's is the sole account of the earthquake, rent rocks, opened graves, and resurrected saints. From the list of items in Samuel's prophecy of Matthew 27:51b–53, it is striking that Jesus isolates the appearance of the awakened dead. "An earthquake is always possible, and natural, and proves nothing," as Paine stated; "but this opening of the graves is supernatural. . . . Had it been true, it would have filled up whole chapters of those books, and been the chosen theme, and general chorus of all the writers; but instead . . . this most important of all . . . is passed off in a slovenly manner, by a single dash of the pen, and that by one writer only, and not so much as hinted at by the rest."⁴⁸ In the Book of Mormon, when Jesus reprimands

48. *Theological Works*, 133. It is also striking that in 3 Nephi 24, Smith's Jesus then pivots from Matthew 27 to Malachi 3. Paine had attacked them both consecutively in that order (*Theological Works*, 241–42), in his *Examination of the Passages*, as he made his way through the quotations of the Old Testament in the gospels, from Matthew 27:51b–53, where no prophecy is quoted, to Mark 1:1–3, where the preaching of John the Baptist is supposed to be a fulfillment of Malachi 3:1. This Matthew-Malachi order, shared between Paine and Smith,

his New World disciples for not recording the fulfillment of the key aspect of Samuel's prophesy, he obliquely reprimands Mark, Luke, and John for not supporting Matthew, the first evangelist. After Jesus gets them to attest to the fulfillment of Samuel's words about the awakened dead, thus corroborating the verses in Matthew—they were there and saw the appearance of the saints but forgot to write it down—Jesus censures the disciples themselves for abandoning Matthew to Paine's derisive challenge.⁴⁹

is perhaps the strongest suggestion, such as it is, that Smith may have had a copy of Paine at hand.

49. Granted that one of Smith's main goals behind composing the prophecy and fulfillment was to protect Matthew all along, a bit of a puzzle persists, namely why he did not go on to compose an account of the appearance and ministry of the awakened dead in the New World. In my estimation, only a couple of scenarios are plausible. Either Smith decided the task was too hard: biblical commentators had reached a similar verdict in their efforts to explicate Matthew 27:52–53, and Paine's satire rendered the interpretive issues much more difficult. Or he apprehended that whatever he composed in the Book of Mormon, he could never rewrite the actual gospel manuscripts, which was ultimately Paine's demand. Hickman ("Amerindian Apocalypse," 452, 457n4) thinks Smith has the Christian savior unmask Nephite racism against Lamanites and by extension the white supremacy of British-American churches; the fact that there is no account of the appearance and ministry of the awakened dead after Jesus' reminder and command is due to perpetual Nephite prejudice. Analyzing the scene for race as well, Mueller (*Mormon People*, 49–50, 242n82) diverges from Hickman in that he thinks Jesus commands the disciples to record the prophecy of the saints' appearance, not its fulfillment in 3 Nephi, and they do, which is why the prophecy can be read in the book of Helaman. See also D. Lynn Johnson, "The Missing Scripture," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 2 (1994): 84–93. It seems indisputable to me, however, that Smith's Jesus is focused on the recording of prophecy fulfilled. He asks the disciples why they failed to write that the saints "did arise and appear" and "did minister" (3 Nephi 23:11), not merely that the saints would. Be that as it may, an implication of my argument is that this dominical care has more to do with defending and supporting the first canonical gospel than it does with integrating the subaltern into the canon, though Smith certainly made a deliberate choice of a Lamanite to utter the retro-prophecy Paine called for, just as the Bible's particularism was another deist critique.

Placed in the context of biblical commentaries as well as other apologetic responses to the *Age of Reason*, Smith and his text stick out as intrepidly creative, albeit fantastical. Whereas Henry's method for dealing with rationalist critiques was to denounce them as curiosity and covetous wisdom, and whereas Bishop Watson told Paine he was afraid that conjecture alone would be tantamount to steadying the ark of God's sacred word, Smith had no qualms creating another entire bible in the process of rescuing Matthew 27:51b-53—among his text's pluriform drives. As with the darkness at the crucifixion, he embellished the natural phenomenon of the earthquake to the degree of the blatantly preordained.⁵⁰ He also brought the evidence to the skeptics. While Doddridge and Boudinot could point to Matthew's rent rocks visible in far-off Jerusalem, Smith could gesture toward any one of the taller mountains in the western hemisphere as proof that God/Jesus directed nature, that Jesus was the Son of God, and that prophecy had been fulfilled. So deists in the US did not need to travel to the holy land; they only needed to consult the Book of Mormon and a topographical map. If they persisted in their faithlessness—and Smith may have grasped that he could not persuade most of them—as some consolation believers might feel assured that infidels would be destroyed at the second coming of Christ, on the model of apostate Nephites' ruin. Like Boudinot, Smith summoned skeptics to repent and believe the scriptural warrants of Jesus' messiahship. But for Smith, unlike Boudinot, extra-canonical post-resurrection appearances of the Christian savior across the globe were not hypothetical (3 Nephi 15:11-16:3; see also 2 Nephi 29:12-13).

When it came to Matthew's opened graves and resurrected saints absent from the rest of the gospels, Smith broke with exegetes and other apologists. He conceded to the arch-infidel that the omitted material

50. Sans context, Roberts (*Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 238) aptly perceived the embellishment already in the 1920s.

did constitute a discrepancy in scripture, and employing some commonsense rationalism, he blamed the disciples for their forgetfulness. He was willing to portray the second, third, and fourth evangelists as fallible in order to guard the essence of biblical infallibility—in this case, the trustworthiness of singular truths in the first gospel, which had to be vouchsafed at all costs if any of the evangelists were to retain eyewitness and apostolic authority.

This solution in 3 Nephi—to the problem of Matthew 27:51b–53, exacerbated by Paine—brought with it an unresolved tension. If the risen Jesus could remind and command the disciples in the New World to write, he could have done the same in the Old. Where, then, were the Markan, Lukan, and Johannine accounts of the appearance of the awakened dead? Perhaps Smith resolved the tension as he dictated the remainder of the Book of Mormon. In the final segment of the text, which he dictated last but which comprises the start of the narrative, Smith had the sixth-century-BCE prophet Nephi, son of Lehi, report a sweeping apocalyptic and anti-Catholic vision of Europe/Britain and colonial America. In Nephi's vision, the Bible is transferred from the Jews to the Christian Gentiles, and from them to a remnant of Israel living in the Americas: the once Christian Indians. But en route, the Bible is corrupted by a "great and abominable church" that is said to have "taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious" (1 Nephi 13:26). Nephi sees that "other books" would be revealed in order to prove to the Christian Gentiles, the Amerindians, and the balance of the scattered Jewish population "that the records of the prophets and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are true," and in order to "make known the plain and precious things which have been take away from them" (1 Nephi 13:39–40; *nota bene* the synecdoche of traditional authorship: the Old Testament is subsumed under "the records of the prophets," and the New Testament under "the records of the apostles"). One of those "other books" is the Book of Mormon itself. And one of those "plain and precious parts"

that were “taken away” from the Bible is arguably the passage corresponding to Matthew 27:51b-53 that seemed to be missing from Mark, Luke, and John.⁵¹ Smith certainly had these unique verses in Matthew on the brain while dictating 1–2 Nephi.⁵² As back-up to Samuel’s prophecy from the first century BCE, Smith also produced a shorter one for the Matthean earthquake and rent rocks, as well as the darkness, and attributed it to an Old World prophet named Zenos, whose words are supposed to have been on the brass plates, a fuller, Christianized version of Jewish scripture that Lehi and company possessed when they sailed to the Americas. Smith had Nephi echo the words of Zenos and Samuel during the report of his apocalyptic vision (1 Nephi 12:4; cf. Helaman 14:20–27), and he quotes and/or echoes them twice more in the opening of the gold bible (1 Nephi 19:10–12; 2 Nephi 26:3), thereby

51. Even while the text speaks of distorted biblical manuscripts and situates itself as more scripture, it aims to “establish the truth” of the Old and New Testaments (1 Nephi 13:40). This bears some resemblance to the Qur’an. See Räsänen, “Creative Interpreter,” 69; Grant Hardy, “The Book of Mormon,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, edited by Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 140. The similarities may not only be structural. Besides anti-Catholic polemic from Protestants and criticism from deists about the corruption of the Bible, Smith could have picked up knowledge of Muslim belief from such best sellers as Charles Buck’s *Theological Dictionary*. Buck had entries on the “Koran” and “Mahometanism,” including overviews of Muslim belief in lost books of Adam, Seth, Enoch, and Abraham; belief in the corruption of Jewish and Christian scripture; and belief in the restoration of that scripture through God’s angel and prophet. Buck, *A Theological Dictionary: Containing Definitions of All Religious Terms . . .* (repr., Philadelphia: W. W. Woodward, 1815), 248–53, 279–88. For some usage of Buck in Smith’s other more collaborative writings, see, for example, John Henry Evans, *Joseph Smith, an American Prophet* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 95–96.

52. Davis (*Visions in a Seer Stone*, 155–57) hypothesizes that Helaman 13–15, 1 Nephi 12, and 2 Nephi 26 incorporate Smith’s summaries of the narrative, committed to memory.

pushing the prediction many hundreds of years further into the past, from Samuel to Nephi to Zenos.⁵³

Smith's finished picture was somewhat incomplete. As he dictated the prophecy of Samuel the Lamanite and its fulfillment, he blamed the apostles for the missing verses. As he continued to dictate, he also alleged that the Catholics had subtracted things from the Bible, things that his text would restore. Thus altogether: the disciples forget; Jesus reminds and commands them to write, and they do (in the New World); but then a "great and abominable church" deletes their record/s (in the Old World, along with the writings of Zenos on the plates of brass), which is why there is no Markan or Lukan or Johannine account of the Matthean earthquake, rent rocks, opened graves, and resurrected saints. Smith's fellow Protestants could read a kind of parallel account in his text, although the fulfillment of the key aspect of Samuel's prophecy was not narrated there either. For that, readers would need to flip to Matthew 27 in their Bibles. They would need to go back to the KJV.

Conclusion

The Book of Mormon had and continues to have many functions. In the early 1800s, one of them was to defend the Bible against threats such as deism in general and Thomas Paine in particular. Paine's attack ranged broadly, including assaults on the traditional authorship of the books of Moses and Isaiah, the framework of christological interpretation of the Old Testament, and the existence of a historical Jesus. In this article, I've spotlighted what I consider to be the most blatant response to Paine within Smith's text, but let me rehearse a caveat from before: how Smith was exposed to Paine is unknown. No copy of the *Age of Reason* can be definitively put into his hands, since he did not

53. See also Hullinger (*Smith's Response*, 143–51) and Brown (*Smith's Translation*, 140, 152–54) on the Book of Mormon and the in-house production of prophecy fulfilled.

mention or quote Paine in any of his translations, revelations, teachings, or other papers.⁵⁴ Then again, neither would that be a prerequisite for contextualization. Samuel the Lamanite's prophecy and its fulfillment are clearly of a piece with Anglophone discussion and debate surrounding the Matthean earthquake, rent rocks, opened graves, and resurrected saints. Paine was not the only participant in this, not even the only challenger, but it was Paine who drew the most attention to the problematic passage, and it was Paine who said that there ought to be a prophecy of the events.⁵⁵ If Smith had no familiarity with Paine, and if his text just happened to supply that prophecy, the coincidence would be astounding. A connection must be made.

Nothing, however, could be more banal than making connections in literature from the same cultural and linguistic milieu. Comparisons and contrasts have been my central interest. Apart from his literary creativity, his claims to be a revelator, and his ignorance of ancient tongues, what distinguished the youthful Joseph Smith within exegetical and

54. In Minute Book 1 of the Joseph Smith Papers is a complaint and request for scrutiny that Smith filed with the Kirtland High Council in 1835 about the conduct of one of his followers, Almon Babbitt. Smith's brother William had hosted a debate club or school, inter alia, on the question of whether divine revelation was indispensable to happiness. Smith attended, helping with the positive case, but he became uncomfortable after the negative was presented too well, so he wanted the school to halt. The brothers clashed badly over this and other grievances. On William's side, Babbitt said Smith was a sore loser in debate, and that there was no cause for disbandment of the club since there was no harm in playing devil's advocate. To illustrate, Babbitt boasted "he could read Tho. Paine or any other work without being swerved," insinuating Smith's constitution was frail, all of which must have hit a sensitive spot for Smith to launch formal proceedings. See Minutes, 28 Dec. 1835, 132, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-28-december-1835/2>.

55. For another challenge to Matthew 27:51b-53 after the fashion of the second part of the *Age of Reason* but lacking the third part's call for a retro-prophecy, see the anonymous *Critical Remarks on the Truth and Harmony of the Four Gospels . . . by a Free-Thinker* (1827, 82-84).

apologetic ranks was his concession to skeptics of the Bible that the Christian scriptures were at variance and that they had been corrupted. The disciples forgot to record some things, plus some things had been “taken away from,” not added to, “the gospel of the Lamb” in the post-apostolic phase of manuscript copying. As Protestant as his beliefs were in diverse areas, Smith’s model of corruption by omission was not. Out of necessity, he made a move that few if any others ventured to make in order to save God’s word from the onslaught of skeptics: he admitted the gospels were inconsistent, while chalking it up to the humanness of the evangelists and providing a parallel scriptural account as well as prophetic utterances to compensate. Precisely because Smith was uncredentialed, he could disregard apologetic dogma—from the Anglican archdeacon William Paley (1743–1805) to the Baptist restorationist Alexander Campbell (1788–1866)—that gospel omissions were not discrepancies or contradictions no matter how many infidels came forward.⁵⁶ The scribe did not respond to Paine in the learned discourse of qualified exegetes and apologists. But with his folk-magic peep stone, he did defend the Bible, taking Paine more seriously than many trained clergy and academics.⁵⁷

In fact, by having an Israelite-Amerindian prophet forecast the events in Matthew 27:51b–53, and by having Christ descend from the clouds to guarantee that the prediction’s realization be written down,

56. William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* . . . (repr., Boston: I. Thomas and E. T. Andrews, 1803), 271–74; Alexander Campbell, “Letters to Humphrey Marshall, Esq. Letter V,” *Millennial Harbinger* (Bethany, Va.) 2 no. 4 (Apr. 4, 1831): 150–56. In the midst of his debate with Humphrey Marshall that spun off from his larger debate with Robert Owen, Alexander Campbell critiqued the Book of Mormon. He noticed the prophecy of Samuel the Lamanite and the recording of its fulfillment, but he could not or would not appreciate what Smith was doing as a co-defender of the Bible. Campbell, “Delusions,” *Millennial Harbinger* (Bethany, Va.) 2 no. 2 (Feb. 7, 1831): 89.

57. On learned versus popular discourse in British-American biblical interpretation, see Mihalyfy, “Heterodoxies and the Historical Jesus,” 14–23.

Smith composed what is probably the longest and most elaborate answer to Paine's challenge ever imagined. This has not been recognized before in scholarship maybe because the Book of Mormon is often studied in terms of revelation and an open canon of scripture. No either/or approach to the text is required, and I do not deny it had that extracanonical function and many others already in the beginnings of Mormonism.⁵⁸ It was also meant to defend the Old and New Testaments at a time when Matthew was still assumed to be the first gospel and hence the frontline for Bible-believing Christians to hold against freethinkers, deists, infidels, and skeptics.⁵⁹ The overall biblical

58. For recent studies of how Smith's text undermines the fixity of holy and secular writ and how it mimics print copies of the Bible so as to position itself with biblical weight and substance, see, respectively, Elizabeth Fenton, "Open Canons: Sacred History and American History in *The Book of Mormon*," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanist* 1, no. 2 (2013): 339–61; and Seth Perry, "The Many Bibles of Joseph Smith: Textual, Prophetic, and Scholarly Authority in Early-National Bible Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 3 (2016): 750–775; Seth Perry, *Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018), 110–28. I do not deny, but I do wonder whether that may be ancillary.

59. Matthew 27:51b–53 is one of several passages from the first gospel supported in the Book of Mormon. Before the Common Era, Nephi's apocalyptic vision encompasses the virgin birth (1 Nephi 11:13–21; see also 2 Nephi 17:14; Alma 7:10; cf. Matthew 1:18–25; and Luke 1:26–38). The same Nephi preaches a proleptic homily on why Jesus would be baptized "to fulfill all righteousness" (2 Nephi 31:4–13; cf. Matthew 3:14–15 KJV). Then over a half millennium later, when the resurrected Christ appears to the Amerindians after the light of the star at his nativity (Helaman 14:5; 3 Nephi 1:21; cf. Matthew 2:1–12), and after the darkness and the earthquake at his death, he delivers the Sermon on the Mount (3 Nephi 12–14; cf. Matthew 5–7). Unique to Matthew (and Luke), any of these passages would have been an easy critical target, and Paine assailed the virgin birth with as much choler as the resurrection (*Theological Works*, 33–34, 112–14, 120, 127–28, 145, 215–19, 221–24). There are, as well, many subtler examples of Matthean phraseology from the KJV used creatively in Smith's text having nothing to do with defense of the Bible. For some within the words of Samuel the Lamanite, see Fenton, "Nephites and Israelites," 290; and Berkey and Spencer, "Complexity," 301–5.

apologetic thrust of Smith's text deserves more consideration, which will be of significance not only for understanding the impulses of his movement in the early 1800s but also for sussing out what type of bonds the assorted Latter-day Saints are to have to the Bible, and whatever tenuous ties to biblical criticism, in our information age—as faith is yet again in crisis.