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Joseph Smith, Defender of the Faith

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A REASSESSMENT OF JOSEPH SMITH ON THE BASIS OF HOW THE BOOK OF MORMON reflects the cultural context in which Smith lived leads the author to understand Smith as one who attempted to defend authentic Christian faith at his time and in his environment.

When the Book of Mormon appeared in 1830, non-Mormons thought that Joseph Smith had written it and that it was therefore of no consequence. In 1834 Eber D. Howe¹ propounded the Spaulding Manuscript theory, which ascribed the historical portions of the book to Solomon Spaulding's novel about the origin of the American Indians and the Biblical and religious motifs to Sidney Rigdon, one of Mormonism's most important early converts. A Spaulding manuscript turned up in 1884, but it had little relation to the theme of the Book of Mormon. To retain the Spaulding theory, non-Mormons supposed that Rigdon had taken the still missing manuscript from a printing shop in Pittsburgh and had not returned it to the Spaulding family.

At the turn of the century I. W. Riley set forth a psychological theory about the originator of Mormonism.² He disregarded the Spaulding theory and considered Smith the author of the new scripture. Smith was said to be an epileptic, a paranoiac, and

a dissociated personality; nevertheless he was the author.³

Leading scholars of Mormon origins today operate with an environmental theory to explain Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon,⁴ but few have seen the book as Smith's response to his culture. Mario De Pillis, however, sees Smith's activity as

³ Bernard DeVoto considered Smith a paranoiac. See "The Centennial of Mormonism," *American Mercury*, XIX (January 1930), 1—13. George B. Arbaugh argued against psychoanalyzing Smith: "Abnormality should be explained, not imagined." *Revelation in Mormonism: Its Character and Changing Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932), Appendix II, p. 239.

⁴ Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1945); Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

The Spaulding Manuscript theory is no longer a creditable hypothesis since it attributes the Book of Mormon mostly to Sidney Rigdon's adaptation of a novel by Solomon Spaulding. Arbaugh's *Revelation in Mormonism* gave the Spaulding-Rigdon theory its greatest expression, but Arbaugh ignored the work of Daryl Chase, who showed that Rigdon did not meet Smith or come to know of the Book of Mormon until 8 months after its publication and fully 16 months after it was turned over to the printer. See Daryl Chase, "Sidney Rigdon, Early Mormon," master's thesis, University of Chicago, 1932.

¹ Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* [sic] (Painesville, Ohio: n. p., 1834).

² Isaac Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith, Jr.* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1903).

a "quest for authority."⁵ He considers the dual priesthood to be Smith's attempt to reestablish divine control in an age of rampant sectarianism. His argument, however, rests mostly on the revelations Smith received after the manuscript of the Book of Mormon had been turned over to the printer. Therein lies the weakness of his case, for it was in the Book of Mormon that Smith first sought to establish the lines of authority and to base his claims.

This article contributes to the discussion of the environmental theory by developing the thesis that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon in defense of God. Furthermore, the article analyzes the apologetic presented in the book and assesses the relevance of this new look at Mormon origins.

De Pillis raises the question of Smith's motives. Few have paid attention to those motives which Smith himself disclosed in his book, so that an understanding of Mormon origins has been retarded. Whitney Cross has rightly objected to psychoanalyzing Smith over the widening gap of time.⁶ In fact, one should look to the title page of the Book of Mormon to see how Smith spelled out his purpose:

to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they

⁵ Mario S. De Pillis, "The Quest for Religious Authority and the Rise of Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, I (March 1966), 69—88. See also "The Social Sources of Mormonism," *Church History*, XXXVII (March 1968), 50—79.

⁶ Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800 to 1850* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1950), p. 143.

are not cast off forever — And also to the convincing of the Jew and the Gentile that Jesus is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD, manifesting himself to all nations.⁷

Smith used his cast of characters to disclose his purpose for the Book of Mormon. It was meant to inspire faith, to encourage steadfastness, to prove and corroborate Biblical facts and doctrine. Words, phrases, and clauses throughout the book express Smith's concern to persuade everyone that the Bible was true, that the Old and New Testaments were reliable, that God really operated in the manner revealed in the Bible, and that the promises made to ancient Israel were about to be fulfilled.⁸

If one uses environmental suppositions to account for Smith and the new scripture, questions raised by Smith's expressed purposes can be more readily answered. Why did he think further proof necessary? Who needed convincing? How did Smith use the Book of Mormon to persuade those who demanded evidence for his claims?

I would assert that Smith was trying to defend belief in God against the sectarianism and popular skepticism of his day. He staked out the principle of revelation as the ground for battle. He regarded himself as the defender of God and intended the Book of Mormon to be an apologetic

⁷ The Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1952).

⁸ See Doctrine & Covenants, Sec. 20:8-36. This is the collection of Smith's revelations that is now a standard Mormon scripture. Sec. 20 was given in April 1830. In this study all references to Doctrine & Covenants will be to revelations on or before April 1830, as the writer is concerned with Smith's purpose when the church began. April 6 was the date of organization that year. Hereafter Doctrine & Covenants will be cited as DC.

for Jesus Christ. That was the purpose and function of his theology.

THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND

For 150 years before the publication of the Book of Mormon, deists had subjected Christianity to critical study. They concluded that: (1) the Biblical records were not authentic; (2) the narratives were untrustworthy and not unique; (3) the two Testaments were discontinuous; (4) the miracles and prophecies were absurd if interpreted literally; and (5) the mysterious elements were a corruption introduced at later times. All doctrines peculiar to revealed religion were discarded, such as doctrines about redemption, the vicarious atonement, the deity of Christ, and special revelation.⁹

Deists regarded Christianity as a corrupted variant of natural religion. The church had debased religion by obscuring it with concepts that deists considered immoral and unreasonable: the Trinity, the innocent suffering for the guilty, predestination, and arbitrary judgments. Moreover, the church had aggrandized itself at the expense of the people it purportedly served.

Ultimately deism was linked with the French Revolution and its ensuing Reign of Terror. When the anticlerical and atheistic Jacobins overran much of Europe in the name of liberty, Americans thought that an Infidel International was aiming for the destruction of free government and

⁹ See Gustav A. Koch, *Republican Religion: The American Revolution and the Cult of Reason* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1933); Herbert N. Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1934).

religion.¹⁰ Since deism had been so popular in France, the Masonic Lodge (understood as deism with rituals), Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine (both deists who had lived in France), and Jefferson's anti-Federalist political party were thought to be agents of the Infidel International.

When Thomas Paine published his *Age of Reason* in 1793, he gave the common man a catechism of popular deism and sparked its organized movement in America.¹¹ The book was serialized in newspapers across the country, and deistic societies distributed it together with the works of Voltaire, Hume, and Elihu Palmer in taverns, shops, and homes. By 1800 deistic logic and argumentation were as well known as popular and simplified Freudian concepts are today. Although it subsided for several years, popular deism revived in the early 1820s.¹²

At the height of deism's popularity in America the churches united in alarm to launch the Second Great Awakening. Revivalists burned their way through western New York to win the westward-moving population back to God. Methodist circuit riders spread a reasoned defense against deistic conclusions. In 1825, however, annual celebrations of Paine's birthday began. When William Morgan disappeared in 1826 and set off an anti-

¹⁰ See Koch, pp. 247 ff. The "Illuminati," an apostate offshoot of Freemasonry, was the organization which sparked the fears of an international conspiracy.

¹¹ *The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology*, ed. Moncure Daniel Conway (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1898).

¹² See Albert Post, *Popular Freethought in America, 1825—1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943).

Masonic furor,¹³ the specter of the Infidel International once again raised its head. Revivalists worked harder than ever to turn the tide against infidelity lest the Reign of Terror be repeated in America.

It was during this excitement in the "burned-over district" of western New York that Joseph Smith began the Book of Mormon. By the end of June 1829 he had turned over to the printer a translation of an ancient chronicle that would convince Jews, Indians, and Gentiles "that Jesus is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD." To understand how Smith meant to convince anyone to make such a confession, we must discern the apologetic strand that he wove into the Book of Mormon.

GOD AND REVELATION

Revelation and Skepticism

Focus on God's Immutability. Deists had honed to a fine edge the argument that the God of Christianity was capricious and that the paucity of revelation proved Him so. To convince the Gentiles, Smith had to demonstrate that God still dealt with men as He had done in the past.¹⁴ He regarded revelation and charismatic gifts as necessary at all times and urged his readers to accept them on the basis that God is unchangeable. Moroni advances a typical position in a sermon:

And again I speak unto you who deny the revelations of God, and say that they are done away, that there are no revelations, nor prophecies, nor gifts, nor healing, nor speaking with tongues, and the interpre-

¹³ See Cross, chap. 6, "The Martyr," pp. 113 to 125.

¹⁴ The argument applies to other matters, such as redemption and infant baptism: 2 Ne. 2:4; Moro. 8:11-12, 18.

tation of tongues; behold I say unto you, he that denieth these things knoweth not the gospel of Christ; yea, he has not read the scriptures; if so, he does not understand them. For do we not read that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and in him there is no variableness neither shadow of changing? And now, if ye have imagined up unto yourselves a god who doth vary, and in whom there is shadow of changing, then have ye imagined up unto yourselves a god who is not a God of miracles. But behold, I will show unto you a God of miracles, even the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; and it is that same God who created the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are. (Morm. 9:7-11)

Through the words of Nephi, Smith argued that Christians played into the hands of skeptics when they would deny present-day revelation and miracles, or when they would say

behold there is no God today, for the Lord and the Redeemer hath done his work, and he hath given his power unto men; behold, hearken ye unto my precept; if they shall say there is a miracle wrought by the hand of the Lord, believe it not; for this day he is not a God of miracles; he hath done his work. (2 Ne. 28:5-6)

Certain Christians had offered such an explanation for the cessation of revelation and charismatic gifts, but Smith insisted that they were denying God's power (2 Ne. 28:6). In his opinion, miracles had not ceased since Christ's ascension, nor had angels ceased appearing to men, nor had God kept from men the power of the Holy Ghost. (Moro. 7:27, 29-36)

Wherefore, if these things have ceased wo be unto the children of men, for it is because of unbelief, and all is vain . . . if

these things have ceased, then has faith ceased also. (Moro. 7:37-38)

Smith maintained the continuity of God's dealings with mankind by holding skeptical minds responsible for any suspension of revelation and miracles. Moroni elaborated this in his farewell to the Lamanites¹⁵ when he enumerated the gifts of the Spirit:

And I would exhort you, my beloved brethren, that ye remember that he is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and that all these gifts of which I have spoken, which are spiritual, never will be done away, even as long as the world shall stand, only according to the unbelief of the children of men. . . . if the day cometh that the power and gifts of God shall be done away among you, it shall be because of unbelief. (Moro. 10:19, 24)

God would produce the Book of Mormon "that I may prove unto many that I am the same yesterday, today, and forever" (2 Ne. 29:9; cf. 6-8). By having Smith usher the book into the world, God proved

to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old; thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever. . . . By these things we know that there is a God in

¹⁵ The Lamanites were the descendants of Laman, son of Lehi. The Lamanites eventually rejected God's covenant, made war against the Nephites, annihilated them, and were here when Columbus discovered America. They are the forefathers of the Indians. The word is also used to designate all Indians.

The Nephites, descendants of Nephi, son of Lehi and Laman's brother, in general remained steadfast in the covenant. The writers of the records found in the Book of Mormon were all Nephites.

heaven, who is infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting the same unchangeable God, the framer of heaven and earth, and all things which are in them. (Doctrine & Covenants, Sec. 20:11-12, 17)¹⁶

Smith countered popular deism by identifying the Creator as the same God who revealed Himself through written revelation and charismatic gifts. He chided Christians who denied present revelation for playing the skeptics' game. According to their view, God had changed, even if only in the manner of His relating to men. If "he hath done his work," then "there is no God today" (2 Ne. 28:5-6), and the alternative would be atheism and nihilism.¹⁷

The ground for God's self-revelation was shifted so that man would bear the responsibility for any break in the relationship. Present unbelief, according to Smith, accounted for the lack of ongoing revelation and charismatic gifts within and without the churches. God had always related to man on the basis of man's faith; to do so on any other terms would indeed have made God mutable.

The Issue Allegorized. Smith elabo-

¹⁶ W. W. Phelps wrote in the first number of the first Mormon periodical (June 1832) "that this generation may know, that the Star comes in these last days . . . to bring the Revelations and Commandments which have been, but to publish those that God gives NOW, as in days of old, for he is the same God yesterday, today and forever." *The Evening and Morning Star*, I (June 1832), 7. The same statement is found with variations of punctuation and capitalization in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Deseret Book Company, 1927), I, 274.

¹⁷ Al. 37:3; 1 Ne. 5:14-16; 2 Ne. 4:1-2.

rated his view of the controversy among evangelicals, rationalists, and skeptics in a mixture of vision and allegory. The allegory and clues for its interpretation are dispersed throughout 1 Nephi 8—15. After considering the allegory and its given interpretation, one can see its relevance in Smith's defense of God.

Nephi was led out of a dark and dreary wasteland by an angel to view a tree with lovely fruit which, when tasted, filled him with joy. After inviting his family to partake, Nephi noticed a river near the tree, a straight and narrow path leading to the tree, and an iron railing, or rod, separating the path from the river.

Crowds of people followed the path toward the tree, but many missed their way and were lost when a dark mist engulfed them, while others held onto the iron rod and safely reached the tree. Once there, they ate the fruit but felt only shame because many scoffers were ridiculing them. Subsequently they fell away and vanished.

Other multitudes found the tree via the path and iron rod, but when they ate the fruit, they paid no attention to the scoffers. Throngs of people failed to hold on to the iron rod and were lost along strange byways, or were drowned in the river.

Still others, who abandoned the path and the iron rod, made their way across the river into the company of the scoffers. They joined them in a huge building that was high in the air. The building was separated from the tree by the river, which was a huge gulf between them. Finally the building fell from its height and carried its occupants to their destruction.

The allegory suggests that life is dreary and lost when there is no communion with God. The tree of life represents such com-

munion, for the tree stands for the love of God as it is found through His condescension in Jesus Christ's birth. To eat of the tree's fruit is to know joy. Countless multitudes seek fellowship, but it is found along only one path, that of a virtuous life.

Not even a virtuous life, however, is enough to bring one to fellowship with God, for many hazards await the traveler: temptations and terrors (the dark mist); a living, existential hell (the river); the approval of the sophisticated, which seems more attractive than the tree (the scoffers in the great building); or a lost existence on the broad roads that lead away from the tree—to nowhere.

Only by holding onto the Word of God (the iron rod) can one find communion with God. Yet even some who reach the tree and eat the fruit feel shame when scorned by the scoffers. They become apostates. Others, however, eat the fruit and ignore the taunts.

The scoffers represent the world, which, because of its pride in scientific knowledge, philosophy, and reason, rejects Christianity. All Jews and Hebrews who reject their Messiah fall into this category and are divided from God by His justice. In the final showdown between the unbelievers and the disciples of a Christianity which accepts ongoing revelation and spiritual gifts (the 12 apostles of the Lamb—1 Ne. 11:36), the worldly wise will be humiliated and their vaunted intellectual defenses will mock them.

Smith used this allegory and its interpretation to make several points. First, he intended to point out that acceptance of present-day revelation was essential. That was illustrated in the joy that Lehi felt on

account of his sons Nephi and Sam, who accepted his visions, and his grief on account of Laman and Lemuel, who rejected them. Second, Smith suggested that a person must hold onto the Bible, the iron rod, if he is not to be lost from God or become His active enemy. Third, the history of this continent—from the time of the Tower of Babel to the millenium—was portrayed as an elaboration of the conflict between those who accepted present revelation and charismata and those who denied them and/or denied Christ and God.

Is life with God found through His ongoing Word, by some other means, or not at all? That is the issue throughout the vision and allegory. Smith's position is presented by Nephi, who wanted the same vision that his father had had and believed that he would get it because God does not change.

For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round. (1 Ne. 10:19)

The disclaimer of anticlerical skeptics is sounded by the sullen pair Laman and Lemuel:

Now, he says that the Lord has talked with him, and also that angels have ministered unto him. But behold, we know that he lies unto us . . . and he worketh many things by his cunning arts, that he may deceive our eyes, thinking, perhaps, that he may lead us away into some strange wilderness; and after he has led us away, he has thought to make himself a king and a ruler over us, that he may do with

us according to his will and pleasure. (1 Ne. 16:38)

Christians who denied present revelation were to find themselves in tune with the churlish Laman and Lemuel!

Revelation in the Book of Mormon

According to Smith, revelation comes because of meritorious living by voices, dreams, visions, angelic visitations, theophanies, prophecy, and through records. It is the making and keeping of records that is of most importance.

In contrast to the Bible, no book of the Mormon scripture has an unknown author, for every writer is identified by genealogy. The time of each book's composition is also known, for Smith provided a detailed calendar.

The most ancient records in the American scripture are found in the book of Ether, which tells of Jared and his family leaving the Tower of Babel with their language—by the Lord's dispensation—unconfounded. Jesus appeared to them and commanded Jared's brother to record what he heard and saw during Christ's prenatal visit. That record, and two stones by which it could be translated, were to be kept sealed until after Christ's crucifixion (Eth. 3:21-22; 4:1). Generations later Jared's descendant, Ether, edited the record and added to it. (Eth. 2:13; 13:14)

Another grouping of records is found in the rest of the Book of Mormon. Those records come from the family of Lehi, a descendant of Manasseh, who was given the inheritance of a half-tribe of the Biblical Joseph. Lehi's family was in Jerusalem before the first Babylonian offensive, when Lehi had a vision of the city's destruction, the Messiah's advent, and the

world's redemption. He recorded this along with other visions and prophecies (1 Ne. 1:16, 19), and then the family fled Jerusalem.

When they left, they took along the plates of Laban, Lehi's brother, that contained Lehi's genealogy, the record of the Jews (1 Ne. 3:3, 12, 24; 4:38), words spoken by the prophets since the world began (1 Ne. 3:20), and the law of Moses. (1 Ne. 4:15)

Laban's 24 brass plates also contained some prophecies of Biblical Jeremiah (1 Ne. 5:11-13), Jacob (3 Ne. 10:17), and Joseph (2 Ne. 4:2). The genealogy of Lehi and Laban went back to Biblical Joseph. From the "record of the Jews" there were also the Pentateuch and the Old Testament historical books down to the time of Zedekiah. (1 Ne. 5:11-13)

Nephi edited Lehi's plates and added to them. In the following centuries Nephi's descendants edited them from time to time and added prophecies made since the last edition. They also recorded the fulfillment of former prophecies. The Nephites recorded every aspect of Christ's earthly career, which they saw in vision or revealed in prediction. They recorded Christ's visit to America and kept for posterity His own correction of an omission in the plates. (3 Ne. 23)

By means of the plates the people of God knew of God's mysteries, records, and commandments; without the plates they would have "suffered in ignorance" (Mos. 1:3). Through future generations the plates would be "preserved by the hand of the Lord until they should go forth unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, that they shall know of the mysteries contained thereon." (Al. 37:4)

Before Mormon finished his edition of the records, the plates of Jared's brother and the two stones, or interpreters, were found and added to the collection. The interpreters eventually were to enable Joseph Smith to translate the ancient records. Moroni finished the record of his father, Mormon, added his own, and buried the total collection.

The next chapter in the record transmission began with the finding of the Nephite records at Cumorah Hill. Appearing now as an angel in September 1827, Moroni committed the plates to Joseph Smith for their translation. By identifying the records as the "stick of Joseph" of Ezek. 37:16 and the "sealed book" that cries "out of the dust" of Is. 29:4, Smith made the discovery of the plates a fulfillment of prophecy.

In the face of skepticism, Smith tried to bolster revealed religion in several ways: (1) The genealogy provided for all records accurately identified the writers and their times. This plugged the gap that Paine had criticized in the Bible, namely, that books of testimony could not accurately be placed with their times or authors.¹⁸ (2) By tracing the records back to Jared and asserting that prophecies from Adam's time were also available, it was possible to maintain that man had also kept records in his relationship with God. (3) The value of hearsay reports of signs and wonders and historical events for revealed religion was bolstered in opposition to Paine.¹⁹ (4) The communication of matters previously unknown via prophecy and visions met Paine's demand that rev-

¹⁸ Paine, pp. 91—92, 94—95, 105—9, 111, 118—19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 183.

elation should communicate only material previously unknown.²⁰ (5) Christ's interest in record-keeping and His bringing them up to date supported the contention that God reveals Himself through writing and human language. Paine had denied that possibility.²¹ (6) The inclusion of "interpreters" with the plates insured that God provided for an accurate translation of the records. (7) Finally, the Bible could be shown to be a revelation by its comparison with and correction by the newly translated Nephite scripture.

Personal Revelation

If Paine could use scientific suppositions to check the findings of science, Smith reasoned, then he should not object to using spiritual guidelines to check matters of religion. The guidelines could be found in Moroni's address to the future readers of the Book of Mormon:

Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things, if it be wisdom in God that ye should read them, that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down unto the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts. And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things. (Moro. 10:3-5)

²⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 38, 170.

If one wants to believe the Book of Mormon, he will find an inner witness that the book is true.

This is the kind of personal revelation that Smith's three witnesses looked for and found.²² Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer were challenged to receive their own testimony of the genuineness of the plates and their translation. In their testimony they declared that the plates "have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us."²³

Alexander Campbell described the frustration he felt after a conversation with Harris, Cowdery, and Whitmer:

I would ask them how they knew that it was God's voice which they heard—but they would tell me to ask God in faith. *That is, I must believe it first, and then ask God if it is true!*²⁴

²² They testified: "That we . . . have seen the plates which contain this record And we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us And we also testify that we have seen the engravings which are upon the plates; and they have been shown unto us by the power of God, and not of man. And we declare . . . that an angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes that we beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon" "The Testimony of Three Witnesses," frontispiece, *The Book of Mormon*.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Alexander Campbell, *Delusions. An Analysis of the Book of Mormon . . . and a Refutation of Its Pretences to Divine Authority* (Boston, 1832), p. 15.

A debate between Tyler Parsons and Elder Freeman Nickerson illustrates how a Mormon could apply this in his witnessing and how the argument was vulnerable. Nickerson knew that the Book of Mormon was a true revelation from God "by the power of God, for his voice had

Campbell illustrated Smith's intent. If he could not affirm a personal witness, neither could he deny the witnesses theirs!²⁵

Smith attempted to uphold personal revelation against the claims of deists, orthodox Christians, and rationalistic Christians, so that God would not be charged with having changed His mode of relating to man. If a person could receive a testimony that the Book of Mormon was true, the charges of skeptics could at least be brought to a standoff.

made it known to him, by his obedience to his commands."

Parsons. "Do you know of his [Smith's] digging certain plates out of the earth, in the town of Manchester, in the State of New York?"

Nickerson. "I did not see him dig them up."

Parsons. "Then how dare you say in your statement to the audience, that you knew it was all true, for the voice of the Lord had declared it? What do you mean by the voice of the Lord?"

Nickerson. "From hearsay; from those that knew it by the power of God."

Parsons. "Mr [sic] Nickerson, do you suppose Cowdery, Whitmer and Harris, the three witnesses that have testified to seeing these plates, have sworn by the same rules you have stated, viz: hearsay?"

Nickerson. "I do not know."

Tyler Parsons, *Mormon Fanaticism Exposed: A Compendium of the Book of Mormon, or Joseph Smith's Golden Bible* (Boston: Tyler Parsons, 1842), pp. 5, 44.

²⁵ The witnesses were remarkably true to their testimony. All the three witnesses fell out with Smith, but never denied their testimony. They actually affirmed it! John Whitmer, one of the eight witnesses, apostasized in 1838, but publicly remained true to his statement. He believed that a supernatural power was responsible for his having seen the plates. Cf. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, III, 307. Preston Nibley compiled the present known facts of the 11 witnesses in *The Witnesses of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1953).

PROPHECY PROVES REVELATION

Recognition of Deistic Arguments

Paine had pictured predictive prophecy as a corruption of an original poetic art, but Smith showed that prophecies from the time of Adam were on the brass plates of Laban (1 Ne. 3:20). Soon after the publication of the Book of Mormon he produced the prophecies of Adam himself.²⁶

Nevertheless, Smith acknowledged the skeptics' objections. By means of the person of Korihor, the Anti-Christ of the Book of Mormon, and also through some unbelieving Nephites, Smith presented the deistic case as he saw it:²⁷ Bible traditions were considered foolish and untrustworthy; foreknowledge was held to be impossible; prophecy was really a delusion used by corrupt priests to manipulate people; and there could be no way of knowing the truth of prophecy, since the law of averages would always allow for some correct guesses. After a fashion, Smith managed to enlist prophecy in defense of revelation, thus answering the charges of Korihor and the impious Nephites.

Purpose and Function of Prophecy

Smith dealt with covenants, promises, and prediction as facets of one transaction. Accordingly, the Book of Mormon declares that God will fulfill His covenants in the future²⁸ as He has in the past.²⁹ Simi-

²⁶ Book of Moses, 5:10; 6:8, in *Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1921). The Book of Moses was produced in December 1830 before Smith left New York for Ohio.

²⁷ Al. 30:6-26; Hel. 16:13-16.

²⁸ 1 Ne. 14:17; 2 Ne. 6:12; 3 Ne. 16:5; 20:27; 21:7; 29:9.

²⁹ 1 Ne. 9:6; 10:13, 17; 18:11; 20:14; 2

larly, He will fulfill His promises³⁰ and prophecies.³¹

The Book of Mormon identifies its own as well as Biblical prophecies that have been fulfilled or have yet to be fulfilled. Old Testament restoration passages will be fulfilled in the impending millenium. Millennial events will get under way sometime after the Book of Mormon comes forth. The reader is assured that God will yet fulfill the covenant with Israel through the events on the millennial agenda.

Paine thought that predictive prophecy was useless because the fulfillments would be unnoticed by mankind's vast majority even if they occurred. Smith met that objection by making his scripture record the giving and fulfilling of prophecy.³² Fulfilled prophecy was intended to inspire faith in future fulfillment and to lead one to expect the imminent windup of this world's affairs and the beginning of the millenium.

Smith also claimed that prophecy demonstrated that the principles of faith were known to the first inhabitants of earth. The content of doctrine (that is, the knowledge of repentance, baptism, faith, and continuing revelation) was therefore the same in all ages. God had not changed His mode of relating to man. If anyone

Ne. 3:14; 5:19; 10:17; 31:18; Al. 37:16-17; 50:19; 3 Ne. 27:18.

³⁰ Morm. 5:14; Eth. 13:11-12.

³¹ 1 Ne. 20:13-14; 22:20; Morm. 1-4, 19; Mos. 20:21-22; Al. 37:26; 3 Ne. 1:13; 10:11-14; 15:6; Eth. 15:33; 3 Ne. 20:11-12, 22; Moro. 8:29; 10:28. Cf. DC 5:20, "Behold, I tell you these things, even as I also told the people of the destruction of Jerusalem; and my word shall be verified at this time as it hath hitherto been verified."

³² 3 Ne. 8:2 ff; 9:16-17; 10:11-12; 16:17-20; Morm. 1:19; 2:10. Cf. esp. 3 Ne. 1:4-22.

wondered why all that had to be known back to Adam's time, Smith's answer was meant to satisfy such curiosity:

And now I will ease your mind somewhat on this subject. Behold, you marvel why these things should be known so long beforehand. Behold, I say unto you, is not a soul at this time as precious unto God as a soul will be at the time of his coming? [Alma is speaking to his son, Corianton, about 73 B.C.] Is it not as necessary that the plan of redemption should be made known unto this people as well as unto their children? Is it not as easy at this time for the Lord to send his angel to declare these glad tidings unto us as unto our children, or as after the time of his coming? (Al. 39:17-19)

Messianic prophecy was detailed and precise. Book of Mormon prophets knew to the year when Christ would come (1 Ne. 16:4). They knew that He would be born of a virgin (1 Ne. 11:18) whose name would be Mary (Mos. 3:8). He would be baptized by John (1 Ne. 11:27), rejected (2 Ne. 25:12), mocked and scourged (Mos. 15:5), lifted up on a cross (1 Ne. 11:33), break the bonds of death (Mos. 15:8), and rise up from the dead. (2 Ne. 25:13)

Other aspects of prophecy saw historical forces converge on American soil to play out God's plan. The Gentiles would discover America and conquer and convert the Indians. The Jews would suffer dispersion, but would be won back to Christ and return to Jerusalem. The Gentiles would be true to God, but fall away into corrupt churches. Jews, Indians, and Gentiles would all be won back when the Nephite records, the Book of Mormon, came to light. This American record would be translated by a man named Joseph,

whose father's name also was Joseph (2 Ne. 3:6-7, 15). Then, with the return of the Jews to Jerusalem and the winning of the Indians and Gentiles in America, the millenium would dawn.

In sum, the purpose and function of prophecy in the Book of Mormon is to preserve prophecy as a proof for revelation and as evidence for the Christian story. Smith confirmed the Bible as God's revelation and placed himself in leadership of a church that espoused continual revelation.

THE RECORDS OF REVELATION

In defense of God, Smith assailed the natural revelation of deism and the static concept of revelation in traditional Christianity. To enable revealed religion to overcome natural religion, he supported the deistic attack on the view that the present Bible is God's complete and errorless revelation. That freed him to preserve special revelation by his own means.

If revelation had been a phenomenon of the first-century church only and if prophecy had died with Christ and a few minor characters in the New Testament, then, as deists pointed out, God had changed His manner of relating to men. It followed that the closing of the canon made sense. If that were the case, the deists' charge that the Christian view of God denied God's constancy could be confirmed. To avoid admitting the force of that argument, Smith disparaged a Christendom that regarded as sacred a book whose contents had been decided by a committee vote.

Joseph Smith concurred with Ann Lee in urging ongoing revelation as an effective counter to the deists, but he went beyond the Shakers to couple present-day

revelation with a new scripture.³³ His apologetic favored an open canon and continuous revelation, not only in various forms of visions, signs, angelic ministrations, and gifts of the Spirit, but also in revelatory records. He could uphold special revelation only if he could uphold the Bible as a medium of revelation. To defend the Bible, Smith sought the status of revelation for the Book of Mormon.

Smith and the Bible

Smith began with the Protestant tradition that the original autographs presented a true picture of God's relationship with man. The Bible first came forth "from the Jews in purity unto the Gentiles, according to the truth which is in God." (1 Ne. 13:25)

Because they were scandalized that a special revelation caused so many variant interpretations, deists had scuttled the Bible. The Shakers' solution was to seek modern revelation and retain the Bible. The Protestants worked to develop a

³³ The Shakers attributed Europe's religious wars and America's religious discord to the position that the Bible is God's Word for all future ages. Religious contention demonstrated the Bible's insufficiency. The dogmatic confinement of spiritual revelations to a book written for former ages is attended by dead formalism in Christendom and a rapid increase in infidelity — proof positive of apostasy. "The idea . . . that all inspired revelation ceased with the canon of Scripture, is inconsistent with both reason and Scripture." *Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing, Exemplified by the Principles and Practice of the True Church of Christ*, 4th ed. (Albany: The United Society [Shakers], 1856), p. 423. See also p. iii. The first edition appeared in 1808; second, 1810; third, 1823.

Smith accepted the Shaker diagnosis entire. In 1827 a Shaker community was established at Sodus Bay, just 30 miles north of Palmyra, where the Smiths lived.

proper hermeneutic. Smith agreed with the Shakers, but believed that the Bible had once been a clearly understood book. Originally it contained the "plainness of the gospel of the Lord," and was "plain unto the understanding of the children of men" (1 Ne. 13:24, 29). Still, the Bible was a problem.

Smith concluded that two major defects of the present Biblical text were caused by accidental and deliberate corruption. Bible references to sources consulted in its writing (such as the Book of Jasher) indicated the canon's incompleteness.³⁴ Smith echoed deistic Biblical criticism:

Any man possessed of common understanding, know [sic], that both old and new testaments are filled with errors, obscurities, italics and contradictions, which must be the work of men.³⁵

How can one explain the loss of Biblical books and the corruption of the Biblical text? Smith blamed the Catholic Church, the "great and abominable" church of 1 Nephi 13. That church received the complete, uncorrupted Bible from the Jews, but took away "many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away" (v.26). The missing portions are those "which were plain unto the understanding of the children of men, according to the plainness which is in the Lamb of God" (1 Ne. 13:29). Herein lies the explanation for conflicting inter-

³⁴ After he began revising the Bible in 1831, Smith wrote that the "lost" books were the subject of conjecture and conversation among church members. He believed that the apostolic church had some of the lost books. *History of the Church*, I, 132.

³⁵ *Evening and Morning Star*, I (July 1833), 106.

pretations, textual corruptions, errors, contradictions, closing of the canon, and any further problems otherwise insoluble.

In the face of a corrupt and incomplete Bible, Smith had Christ offer the Book of Mormon as His solution:

I will be merciful unto the Gentiles in that day, insomuch that I will bring forth unto them, in mine own power, much of my gospel, which shall be plain and precious, saith the Lamb. (1 Ne. 13:34)

The Book of Mormon

By authenticating all the events of the Old and New Testaments and especially by substantiating the significance of Christ's life and death, Smith's American scripture blunted many of the arguments deists had raised against the historicity of the Bible. The Book of Mormon also reinforced the Bible by clarifying a variety of its textual problems. Smith added, subtracted, or omitted one or more words from Biblical passages to make them logically or doctrinally more acceptable. He explained phrases, clauses, and sentences that had seemed unclear or contradictory.³⁶ For example, this is his resolution of the problems pertinent to the account of the sun's standing still in Joshua 10:12-14:

Yea, and if he say unto the earth, move, it is moved; yea, if he say unto the earth, thou shalt go back, that it lengthen out the day for many hours, it is done; and thus according to his word, the earth goeth back, and it appeareth unto man that the sun standeth still; yea, and behold, this

³⁶ 2 Ne. 12:1-2 corrects Is. 2:2-4; 2 Ne. 23:11 — Is. 3:11; 2 Ne. 17:19 — Is. 8:19; 2 Ne. 29:3 — Is. 9:2; Mos. 14:10-13 — Is. 53:10; 3 Ne. 12:1-3 — Matt. 5:3; 3 Ne. 12:6 — Matt. 5:6; 3 Ne. 13:24-25 — Matt. 6:25; 3 Ne. 13:30 — Matt. 6:30. This is not a complete list.

is so; for sure it is the earth that moveth, and not the sun. (Hel. 12:13-15)

Smith also clarified doctrinal matters. The American scripture lent the weight of antiquity to endorse or to repudiate doctrinal positions. In the Book of Mormon, however, Smith offered no final or unique settlement of various doctrinal positions, and later he developed and modified most of them.

God's Word with a Difference

The Book of Mormon undercut criticisms of the Bible by denying the traditional positions on Biblical inspiration. Deists wondered how verbal inspiration could stand in the light of historical inaccuracies, contradictions, and errors that they found in the Biblical text. The Book of Mormon sidestepped the deistic objection and joined in protest against the orthodox position.

Smith's Nephite editors held that their records contained the Word of God, but not that every word was God's Word. They admitted the possibility of errors: "If there be fault, it be the mistake of men."³⁷ By various means the editors ruled out all inspiration theories to explain the Book of Mormon. They wrote "according to . . . memory" (Eth.5:1).³⁸ They abridged their materials, omitted sections from them, or added other details. Surprisingly, they called attention to their literary deficiencies.³⁹ They also showed that their use of

a "reformed Egyptian" might have let in imperfections. (Morm. 9:32-33)

Indeed, the Book of Mormon appears to be a very human composition. No one, especially in the first decades of the 19th century, would have expected the writers of God's Word to be anxious about proper phrasing or to admit possible errors, as the Nephite authors did. Smith expressed his position about possible errors in Moroni's words:

Condemn me not because of mine imperfection, neither my father, because of his imperfection, neither them who have written before him; but rather give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than we have been. (Morm. 9:31)

Thomas Paine's strictures against changeable language and vulnerable manuscripts as revelatory media apply to the Book of Mormon. But such a weakness turns out to be the book's strength. Smith deserted the traditional defense of verbal inspiration and thereby avoided its deficits.

However, Smith adapted a Protestant position for his own apologetic. Faced with the lack of the original autographs, Protestants developed textual criticism to arrive at an authoritative Biblical text. They held that if there are carefully made copies of the originals, and if there are reliable translations of the copies, then we have the Word of God. Through Moroni, Smith stated his position about the plates from which he translated: "The plates thereof are of no worth. . . . no one shall have them to get gain; but the record thereof is of great worth." (Morm. 8:14)

At this point Smith transferred interest, and one begins to see the new basis for the

³⁷ Title page, 1830 edition, Book of Mormon.

³⁸ Cf. also Jac. 7:26; Morm. 8:1; 1 Ne. 19:16; Jac. 1:2; Morm. 9:32.

³⁹ 2 Ne. 33:1-4; Eth. 12:25, 40; Morm. 8:12, 17.

Book of Mormon as the Word of God. It is the message of the plates that men must heed. If a reliable translation of the plates is available—which Smith supplied—then they are no longer necessary. The only inspiration claimed for the Book of Mormon prior to April 1830 was that it was given to Joseph Smith by inspiration; to others it was confirmed “by the ministering of angels.” (DC 20:10)

Personal revelation, therefore, was the basis for determining the status of the Book of Mormon. Smith translated by inspiration, but he translated a book that had been edited, that possibly contained flaws, and that possibly was incomplete. One could have the angels’ assurance that the translation was truly faithful to the original plates by following Moroni’s advice to the seeker of religious certitude (Moro. 10:3-5). Because of that personal assurance, or revelation, the Book of Mormon would be placed beyond the reach of the higher criticism of deistic logic. The claim of the American scripture to be God’s revelation depended entirely on the reader’s desire to accept it as such.

Smith Reappraised

This study has underscored the necessity of relating deviations within Christianity to their cultural setting. Deviation serves a special function. The historian’s task is to discover that function and why it was useful at the time. This can lead to a sympathetic reappraisal of the founders and followers of Christian cults and to a better understanding of the church today.

Sociology has taught us that change can erode established religious verities. Many turn to their subjective religious experiences to validate their faith rather than to

religious tradition. Brodie, O’Dea, and De Pillis have shown that Joseph Smith was looking for religious certainty at a time when young America was in the midst of rapid social change.

The function of the Book of Mormon was to defend God against early 19th-century popular deism and Christian rationalism, on the one hand, and against Christian orthodoxy on the other. Smith provided two major witnesses to prove that God reveals Himself to men beyond the testimony of nature. He made the Book of Mormon dependent on the Bible for its understanding and the Bible dependent on the Book of Mormon for its defense. The one needs the other. Those who read the Book of Mormon are urged to accept it and God in these last times. And they are urged to accept God’s latter-day saint and prophet, Joseph Smith. Although he is dead, his converts declare that Smith still “is an ambassador for the religion of Jesus Christ” (DC 135:7). By virtue of his martyrdom, he still defends God.

There is a striking parallel between conditions of today and those which led Smith to write the Book of Mormon. Forces within as well as outside the churches have brought a decline in Christendom’s impact, yet people all over are searching for God. For increasing numbers of people that search begins with personal experience.

Many books that deal with astrology, psychic phenomena, and parapsychology are being published and sold today. Highly educated people have seen that no life-style has meaning without the possibility of some reality outside the earthly sphere. It is perhaps noteworthy that American

spiritism arose in the same region and during the same period as Mormonism.

Increasingly people seek to authenticate their religious faith through subjective religious experience. Just as the older liberalism gave rise to neoorthodoxy and "Bultmannism" led Bultmann's students to begin the "new quest" for the historical Jesus, so the parade of theological fads and the sterility of much modern church life has turned many to a new kind of Pentecostalism. Henry Van Dusen has termed Pentecostalism the "third force" in Christendom of the 20th century.⁴⁰ It is a growing force in liturgical churches in America.⁴¹ Those who are attracted to

⁴⁰ See Prudencio Damboriena, *Tongues As of Fire: Pentecostalism in Contemporary Christianity* (Washington: Corpus Books, 1969), for a survey of Pentecostal growth and influence around the world.

⁴¹ See Kevin & Dorothy Ranaghan, *Catholic Pentecostals* (Paramus, N. J.: Paulist Press, 1969); J[osephine] Massingberd Ford, *The Pentecostal Experience: A New Direction for American Catholics* (Paramus, N. J.: Paulist Press, 1970).

Pentecostal experience are often those who have grown weary of a denominational orthodoxy that seems humdrum and joyless.

If one is to learn from historical study and avoid repeating mistakes of the past, then he should recognize that many people need a greater personal experience of God's presence. The events of this century have stimulated hunger and thirst for spiritual experiences in this Age of Aquarius, when rationalism is suspect and mysticism is respected.

Those who deal with Mormons should recognize that these considerations undergird much of Mormonism's theological argumentation. Smith turned from rationalism and conflicting orthodoxies to find his own certainties. As long as Mormonism offers the personal experience of revelation to those who decry rationalism but are restless with traditionalism, it will attract those who look for signs of God's presence.

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