



# The Expanded Canon

## Perspectives on Mormonism & Sacred Texts

Edited by

Blair G. Van Dyke

Brian D. Birch

Boyd J. Petersen

## UVU COMPARATIVE MORMON STUDIES

Comparative Mormon Studies at Utah Valley University is an interdisciplinary program designed to support the academic study of Latter-day Saint culture, theology, literature, and history. Housed in UVU's Religious Studies Program, it offers courses, lectures, conferences, workshops, and other activities with a focus on comparative studies, interreligious understanding, and cross-cultural dimensions of Mormonism. This series is designed to feature the scholarly work of this program and related activities.

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## INTRODUCTION

Among the most distinctive and defining features of Mormonism is the affirmation of continuing revelation through modern-day prophets and apostles. An important component of this concept is the acknowledgement of an open canon—that the body of authoritative scriptural texts can expand as new revelations are made available and presented to the membership for ratification.

### I

The Book of Mormon was the first public manifestation of the new faith of the Latter-day Saints. The publication presented a sweeping narrative of ancient civilizations in the Americas who descended from Jewish refugees that fled from the city just prior to the Babylonian conquest. The tale covers a thousand-year history and contains sermons, war chronicles, and prophecies culminating in the appearance of Jesus Christ in the new world, his establishment of the Christian church, and the eventual apostasy and destruction of these pre-Columbian Christians.

After publishing the Book of Mormon in 1830, Joseph Smith sent missionaries out to proclaim the new gospel with the book as evidence that God had again spoken to humanity and established a second witness to the Bible. Surprisingly, the Book of Mormon was not initially used as a source of theological clarification but rather as a manifestation of the power and relevance of God. Nevertheless, Smith declared the book to be the “keystone of our religion” and proclaimed that “a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.”<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the Bible and the Book of Mormon, two other books of scripture were added to the canon, namely the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. The Doctrine and Covenants is a collection of writings consisting primarily of revelations to Joseph Smith in the early days of the movement. These revelations cover a wide range of issues and

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1. Joseph Smith et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1957 printing), 4:461.

events—from mundane instructions to lengthy visions of the afterlife. Its pages also contain the blueprint for Church government, descriptions of the nature of God, and Church declarations on specific issues.

Finally, the Pearl of Great Price was the most recent addition to the LDS canon and was ratified by the Church in 1880. It contains a variety of documents, including portions of Joseph Smith’s translation of select books of the Bible, a translation of ancient Egyptian scrolls that came into Smith’s possession in 1835, excerpts from Joseph Smith’s official history, and the Articles of Faith—which contain the central tenets of Mormon belief.

These four volumes constitute the “Standard Works” of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and, as such, function as the authorized canon in the affairs of the Church. Though this canon may be enlarged, formal ratification by the membership of the LDS Church is required.

## II

Continuing revelation has been among the most challenging aspects in Mormonism’s relationship with the wider Christian community. Given the centrality and “sufficiency” of the Bible in Protestant life, the idea of scripture beyond the Bible has been both beyond the pale of acceptability and a heightened source of tension between these groups.

The rejection of the Book of Mormon, for example, was not due primarily to its theological content but to the foundational idea among mainstream Christians that the Bible contains all that is sufficient to bring human beings to salvation. Protestants have traditionally affirmed the doctrine of *sola scriptura*—that scripture is the supreme authority in matters of faith and practice. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), for example, states that the “whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.”<sup>2</sup> Associated with biblical sufficiency is the denial of new revelation since the close of the apostolic period. This is specified in the Westminster Confession and reaffirmed in a variety of Protestant documents in the intervening centuries. Important for American evangelical Christians is the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which declares the New Testament “now

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2. Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press), 306.



closed inasmuch as no new apostolic witness to the historical Christ can now be borne.”<sup>3</sup>

The Protestant emphasis on scripture was informed by their reaction to the traditional Catholic understanding of the relationship between “sacred scripture” and “sacred tradition.” Though Catholics agree that the canon is closed and public revelation ceased with the Apostles, they maintain that the teachings of the Catholic Church have authoritative status alongside the Bible. This tradition transmits the Word of God “to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound and spread it abroad by their preaching.”<sup>4</sup>

Because the biblical canon was developed *within* the context of the early Christian Church, scripture cannot appropriately stand outside of it as an independent source of authority. This issue has been a key point of contention between Catholic and Protestant theologians since the earliest days of the Reformation. The Second Vatican Council reasserted the Catholic position that scripture and tradition “merge into a unity and tend toward the same end,” and thus should be “accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.”<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly for Latter-day Saints, the Catholic catechism affirms that the Catholic Church “does not derive her certainty from the holy Scriptures alone,” but through the *living tradition* that preserves what the apostles were taught by Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> Though additional *public* revelation has ceased, the activity of the Spirit in the Church continues through a growth of understanding regarding that which has already been received.<sup>7</sup>

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3. “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” (International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1978). Located in archives of the Dallas Theological Seminary at [http://www.library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI\\_2.pdf](http://www.library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_2.pdf).

4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), Part I, Chapter 2, Article 2.

5. *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation), 2, 9; [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html).

6. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part I, Chapter 2, Article 2.

7. Catholicism maintains an important distinction between public and private revelation. Public revelation consists of Scripture and Tradition and is binding on all Christians, while private revelation includes spiritual manifestations to individuals.

### III

Joseph Smith was captivated by questions of biblical authority. The religious crisis that led to his vision of God was fueled by competing and inconsistent appeals to the Bible. The cacophony of voices made it impossible for him to rely exclusively on the text. In the hotly contested environs of his youth, he reported that Christian preachers “understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible” (JS–H 1:12).

As a result, Smith’s religious experiences became his foundational authority. Upon reporting his First Vision to a local Methodist minister, Smith was rebuffed and told “that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them” (JS–H 1:21).

What makes this story especially intriguing is that Smith reported being “greatly surprised” by the minister’s response. Though the merits of visions and the “gifts of the spirit” were hotly debated among nineteenth-century revivalists, the idea that revelation had ceased had long been established and was commonplace among the Christian establishment.

Smith’s momentous vision and the rise of Mormonism occurred in this contested space. The traditional boundaries of religious experience and scriptural canon were being challenged in ways theretofore unseen. David Holland points out that “such commands and revocations drove a wedge between an evolving church and those who held a fast and fundamentalist commitment to the earlier revelations.”<sup>8</sup> Shakers, Seventh-day Adventists, and other groups were producing new revelations and matching texts, but none of these matched the Latter-day Saints in their scope and impact.

The Book of Mormon provides a clear and authoritative rejection of biblical sufficiency. It narrates the story of a vision given to an ancient American prophet Nephi, who records the voice of God: “Wherefore, because that ye have a Bible ye need not suppose that it contains all my words; neither need ye suppose that I have not caused more to be written” (2 Ne. 29:10). For Mormons, the expanded canon functioned not only across time but across also culture. Nephi later records God telling him:

For behold, I shall speak unto the Jews and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the Nephites and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall

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8. David Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 157.

write it; and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it. (2 Ne. 29:12)

Though Mormonism has yet to mine this capacious application of scripture, the theological space is available to develop an even more expansive “canon outside the canon.”

#### IV

At present, Latter-day Saints relate to their canon in ways similar to other traditions. It is carefully regulated within the confines of ecclesiastical structures, and there is a clear line of demarcation between the Standard Works and other authoritative texts within the Church. However, *canon* and *scripture* have been neither synonymous nor co-extensive within LDS discourse. There are expansive applications of the term in which much of the authoritative discourse of Church leaders is considered scripture. A popular and provocative example can be found in Brigham Young’s statement that “I have never yet preached a sermon and sent it out to the children of men, that they may not call scripture.”<sup>9</sup> Though Young is well-known for his mercurial declarations, this statement (and others like it) have been given currency by more recent LDS leaders who employ them to emphasize the importance of the teachings of living prophets and apostles.

Ezra Taft Benson’s 1980 sermon, “Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet,” offers us a noteworthy case in point. Among the featured points of his address was the idea that the “living prophet is more vital to us than the Standard Works.” Benson recalled a story from the early days of the Church in Kirtland in which a church leader opined publicly that “those who give revelations” should do so according to the “written word of God.” In response—and at the behest of Joseph Smith—Young stood up and declared that “when compared with the living oracles those books are nothing to me. . . . I would rather have the living oracles than all the writing in the books.”<sup>10</sup>

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9. Brigham Young, January 2, 1870, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1854–86), 13:95.

10. Ezra Taft Benson, “Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet,” February 26, 1980, devotional address given at Brigham Young University, [https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/ezra-taft-benson\\_fourteen-fundamentals-following-prophet/](https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/ezra-taft-benson_fourteen-fundamentals-following-prophet/). Benson quotes Brigham Young, *Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, October 1897 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semi-annual), 18–19.

One challenge with this expansive approach, however, lies in determining precisely which extra-canonical discourse ought properly to count as scripture. Given the textured history of LDS teaching and the desire for doctrinal consistency, the teachings most eligible are those which are highlighted and emphasized by contemporary leadership.

Other church leaders have emphasized a more restrictive approach that focuses more exclusively on the primal authority of the Standard Works. This approach is found in the influential writings of Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie, and it was especially amplified by Harold B. Lee, who declared bluntly that if a teaching by a church leader in any way “contradicts what is in the scriptures, it is not true. This is the standard by which we measure all truth.”<sup>11</sup> McConkie was equally declarative: “Even the writings, teachings, and opinions of the prophets of God are acceptable only to the extent they are in harmony with what God has revealed and what is recorded in the standard works.” It follows for McConkie that when church leaders speak explicitly in the name of God, their teaching “will without any exception be found to be in harmony with the standard works.”<sup>12</sup>

This lends itself to a more Protestantized concept of LDS scripture and canon, in which the canon itself is foundational in *determining* which contemporary discourse can rightly be considered scripture. The Westminster Confession, for example, states that the “supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.”<sup>13</sup> Though these two positions are not mutually exclusive, each has developed a lasting sensibility that resonates differently among Latter-day Saints.

## V

Joseph Smith challenged not only biblical sufficiency but also infallibility. Because it was said to be the product of direct revelation, the Book of Mormon is understood to be more pristine than the Bible—so much

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11. Harold B. Lee, “Using the Scriptures in Our Church Assignments,” *Improvement Era*, January 1969, 13.

12. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d. ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 111.

13. Bettenson and Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 306.

so that Joseph Smith deemed it “the most correct of any book on earth.”<sup>14</sup> Though the Bible has in no way lost its status as authoritative scripture, its correctness is qualified to the extent that it was “translated correctly.” The issue for Smith was not in the fallibility of the original authors, but with the transmission of the texts across the centuries.

Among Smith’s many prophetic endeavors, he engaged in an intermittent and ultimately uncompleted project of producing a “new translation” of the Bible. Though the project resulted in nearly five hundred pages of text, it consisted primarily of minor revisions, corrections, and amplifications. Exceptions include the production of entirely new portions of Genesis and Matthew, each of which has contributed to the overall trajectory of Mormon thought.<sup>15</sup>

Noteworthy here is the freedom Smith felt in relation to the texts he encountered—both in the form of received scripture and his own prophetic productions. Though Smith referred to the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, and his work on the Bible as “translations,” they do not neatly fit the common use of the term. Kathleen Flake characterizes Smith’s experience as “an interpretive response to the text” involving the agency required to “rewrite the prophets.”<sup>16</sup>

Revisions to his own revelations also demonstrate some sense of freedom and adaptation—and in some cases contain theological significance. Examples can be seen in the development of the Doctrine and Covenants from his revelations dictated and copied into the Book of Commandments and Revelations. In these instances, Smith appeared more interested in preserving the meaning of the revelation rather than the language. He warned colleagues to “be careful not to alter the *sense* of any of them for he that adds or diminishes the prop[h]ecies must come under condemnation

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14. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:461.

15. See Thomas C. Wayment, ed., *The Complete Joseph Smith Translation of the Old Testament: A Side by Side Comparison with the King James Version* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009); Robert J. Matthews, *Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975); and Scott Faulring and Kent P. Jackson, *Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible* (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2011).

16. Kathleen Flake, “Translating Time: The Nature and Function of Joseph Smith Narrative Canon,” *Journal of Religion* 87, no. 4 (October, 2007): 507–8. See also Heikki Raisanen, “Joseph Smith as Creative Interpreter of the Bible,” *International Journal of Mormon Studies* 2 (Spring 2009): 1–22.

written therein.”<sup>17</sup> According to Grant Underwood, this approach allows these revelations to be both “fully human and fully divine.” By preserving the “sense” of the revelation, there remains “ample room for regarding as inspired both the earliest wording of, as well as the revisions to the texts.”<sup>18</sup> This approach exemplifies efforts among Latter-day Saint scholars to properly account for the data in formulating theologies of revelation and scriptural production.

Despite its rejection of inerrantism, Mormonism leans strongly toward literalist readings of its scripture, which continues to be presented as a perspicuous account of both history and doctrine. Latter-day Saints have thus been loath to accept efforts to demythologize or otherwise downplay the historicity of its sacred narratives.<sup>19</sup>

This volume is a collection of essays designed to explore various dimensions of Mormon scripture. Consistent with other volumes in this series, our aim is to advance the academic study of Mormon theology by promoting quality scholarship from a variety of disciplines and perspectives.

Brian D. Birch  
Boyd J. Petersen  
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17. Joseph Smith, letter to William W. Phelps, July 31, 1832, in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 273; emphasis added.

18. Grant Underwood, “Revelation, Text, and Revision: Insight From the Book of Commandments and Revelations,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 80.

19. “Demythologization” is the term employed by Rudolf Bultmann to challenge theological accounts of the New Testament that rely on the historical accuracy of the texts. Central to Bultmann’s account is the *kerygma*, or proclamation, of the gospel and its transformative power. See Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation,” in *New Testament Theology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. Shubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1–44. Contrasting LDS approaches can be found in Paul Y. Hoskisson, ed., *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2001).

3

## ON THE LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

*James E. Faulconer*

My thesis is that all scripture (at least all Jewish and Christian scripture) should be read literally, perhaps only literally. That means that literal reading is appropriate not only to the narrative portions of scripture, but also to such genres as psalmody, legal texts, allegories, and apocalypse. To defend my thesis I will discuss three issues: “What do we mean by *scripture*?” “What is history?” and “What is a literal reading?” Answering those questions will allow me to say why scripture ought always to be read literally.

### **Scripture**

We have to ask what we mean by the word “scripture” because unless we merely define the term by stipulation, it isn’t obvious what it covers and what it does not. Christians recognize the New Testament as scripture, but most Christians don’t recognize the Book of Mormon as such. Is the Tao Te Ching scripture for Taoists? Might it be reasonable for someone to think of Dante’s *Inferno* as scripture? Let me consider this issue by making three overlapping points.

First, to be scripture is to be part of a canon—whether that canon is formally or informally constituted. So we might say something like this about scripture: Scripture is a set of texts that are recognized as authoritative for a particular thought community. To call something scripture is to speak of it in relation to other books, some of which—like it—are canonical, and some of which are not.

A canon is a collection of texts brought together over time by a reflective, historical community. The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are both excellent examples of canons formed in this way—but so are the less well-defined canons of Western philosophy and those of Japanese literature. So sometimes the canon is formed by an explicit adjudication of relevant authority, and sometimes it is created more informally over time by the

choices of authoritative readers. Not every canon has the kind of history and structure that the Bible has, and not every canon is scriptural; but being canonical is necessary, though not sufficient, for something to be scripture.

Second, to speak of something as scriptural is to say that it has a special relation to a community. I might, of course, refer to a book and say, “That book is scripture for me.” But the addition of “for me” makes my point: when I speak that way, I am using an analogy or a metaphor. When a person says that a text is scripture, he or she is saying, “That book is scripture *for us*; we who belong to this community recognize this as part of our scriptural canon.” In fact, the community may well define itself by that recognition: “We are the believers who accept this text as scripture.”

Third, because scriptural texts are canonical, they have authority over those who recognize them. The character of that authority may differ greatly from one religious group to another, but each will be the group that it is at least partly because it finds in its scriptural texts material that is superior for teaching, particularly for teaching moral and spiritual matters. Many Christians insist that ultimately the authority of scripture is an authority given by the Holy Spirit: under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the church has collected the books together that were written by the revelation of the Holy Spirit. But one could believe that something is scriptural—that it has an authoritative moral and spiritual educative function—without believing that it has attained that authority in the way that Christians generally believe their scriptures receive it. What is important is that it has that kind of authority.<sup>1</sup>

So I take the word *scripture* to mean a set of texts selected over time by a particular thought community for their authority in teaching moral and spiritual truth.<sup>2</sup>

## History

The question of what we mean by *history* is more difficult. It is probably the most difficult of my three questions, so I’ve shored it up by placing it between thinking about what the terms *scripture* and *literal* mean.

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1. Hans-Georg Gadamer says that Gerhard Krüger (*Einsicht und Leidenschaft: Das Wesen des platonischen Denkens* [Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1963]) shows how pre-Platonic Greek thinkers understood their myths as authoritative. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On The Problem of Self-Understanding,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 51.

2. For more on the question of how to define scripture, see James E. Faulconer, “Paul Ricoeur on Scripture,” in a forthcoming festschrift for Louis Midgley.



I have argued elsewhere that if we read a scriptural text as a believing Christian, then we don't read about just the "bare" events that happened, as if there were any a-contextual events.<sup>3</sup> An event, after all, is something that stands out from the unformed flow of time. It stands out to us and in relation to other events. Though we don't want to trust etymology too much, the etymology of the word *event*—*evenir*, "to come out"—suggests the contextuality of the event: it comes to us out of undifferentiated time.

That means that if we read as a believer (which is not the only way one can read; even a believer can read otherwise), then we read about the events that happened as part of God making Himself, His patterns, and His plans manifest in history. That means that from a believing point of view, a history that doesn't include the hand of God isn't a fully true history. But, of course, from a contemporary academic historian's point of view, a true history *cannot* include the hand of God, except perhaps by mentioning it as one of the beliefs held by an actor in history.

Neither of these views of history is one in which the historian reports bare events. Perhaps there are naïfs who think that is what academic historians do, but I doubt that academic historians are among them. Nor is either of these ways of understanding the past in a position to judge the truth or falsity of the other absolutely because each proceeds from a different set of assumptions about what is real, and there is no birds-eye view outside of history from which to choose between them. There is no way for one view to judge the other absolutely because, at least for human beings, no absolute view is possible. In fact, human beings—who live *in* history and are constituted through it—ought not to want such a view from everywhere and nowhere. That is the desire of the Tower of Babel, the desire to leave human limitation behind and reach God on our own power. Multiple histories are always possible. Within that multiplicity the believing historian and the academic historian use two different understandings of history, and in spite of a great deal of overlap, ultimately those two views of history are radically incommensurable. And the question of the difference between them isn't a merely methodological or otherwise technical question. These two views differ because they disagree about what is real, about what is possible.

To think about that claim further, let me offer a rough-and-ready definition of history, as opposed to historiography: History is the horizon of effects that open the world to us. I call that definition rough-and-ready

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3. James E. Faulconer, "Scripture as Incarnation," in *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture* (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2010), 151–202.

because, though I think it will do for my purposes, it needs more thought and refinement. For example, were I to go into this in more depth, I would need to explain how this view of history avoids making history into a straitjacket that forces us along a predetermined causal path. To do so I would argue that the effects of history give us possibilities to which we can respond. In a strong sense, the effects of history are the openness of our future. But that isn't a matter for this discussion.

Given that rough-and-ready definition of history as the horizon of effects within which we find ourselves, consider an example: I was baptized into the LDS Church on February 2, 1962. By thinking in primarily general terms, I can say that event in my personal history is the same as it would be in an academic history of my life. To keep things clear, in what follows I will distinguish between history as I have defined it here (the horizon of effects that open the world) and historiography (an account of those effects, their relations to one another, and the openings that they afford). An academic historiographer giving an account of that event and the possibilities it opened in the world would speak of my attending Brigham Young University for an education, of my experiences as an LDS missionary in Korea in the '60s, and perhaps of the ways in which those experiences made me see the world differently. He or she might speak of my career teaching at BYU and would probably include some of my church service. Surely this historiographer would recognize that my baptism made my marriage possible by creating a direction that resulted in that marriage, with the children and grandchildren that have followed. A thoughtful biographer would be likely to write about the attitudes and feelings made possible by my baptism and events subsequent to it.

In contrast, consider a hypothetical biography by a believer.<sup>4</sup> His or her historiography would surely include most of the supposedly same events that the academic biography included. But it would also include events and entities missing from the latter. The most obvious example would be that at certain key points in this second historiography, where the academic writer might very well speak about powerful experiences I had, experiences of intuition or inspiration, the believing historiographer could speak of the manifestations of the Holy Ghost in my life. These are not just two different interpretations of an event in my life. They are two accounts of two different events, two different ways in which one can say

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4. I don't intend to imply by this that believers cannot be academic historians. I'm talking here about a type, not about particular persons. Believers can certainly write academic histories—but not *as* believers.

that the horizon of the world opened for me. They are two different accounts of what is real. A simple way to make the distinction is to say that, for the academic, what is real is my experience and my psychological response to it; but for the believer what is real is the event, my response, and the Being who initiated my experience. (Neither of those lists exhausts the differences, but they are enough to make the point.)

Because of this different understanding of the real, the believing biographer is certain to write about the past differently than that person would if writing an academic historiography, and vice-versa. And it is imaginable that this difference might even cause the believing biographer to rethink the relation between important documents or events. Perhaps he or she would go so far even as to reconsider their temporal order. Certainly the writer would understand the events of my life differently. It is easy to imagine a believing historiographer writing in a way that, according to an academic one, twists the truth in order to make fully apparent the realities that the believer understands to be manifest in the events in question. But the believer could make the same charge against the academic. Each writes as he or she does to allow the truth of the events in question to show itself, and each could see the other as distorting events in order to show what they want to show, thus masking the real truth of the event.

The difference between these two historiographies is non-trivial. Each reveals a different understanding of history, of the real, of what affects us and makes our present world possible. Every historiography will implicitly reveal what it takes to be real in the world, by showing us that reality in the effects of history.

It is tempting to say, “But there is what happened, and that’s the same. We may have different perspectives on it, but it’s still the same event.” I disagree. History is more complicated than that, which is what makes historiography of any sort more complicated. As Hans-Georg Gadamer says:

[History] determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation, and we more or less forget half of what really is—in fact, we miss the whole truth of the appearance [i.e., an event]—when we take its immediate appearance as the whole truth.<sup>5</sup>

Of course there must be some sense of sameness to the event of my baptism that the academic historiographer tells of and that which the believing

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5. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 300; translation revised.

biographer refers to. But if we think that the “immediate appearance” of an event, what we suppose an eye witness would tell if she only described the physical or social event itself and left out anything not available for documentation, then we miss at least half of that event. Namely, we miss what has allowed us to see the event in the way that we do, the history that has opened the world in this way rather than that.

I hope it is clear that the ultimate incommensurability of believing and academic historiography doesn't mean that the work of the former is metaphorical, at best. Nor does it mean that the work of the latter is, from a believer's point of view, simply false. Both kinds of historiography are about the real world, the world that is, the world that human beings inhabit. And what those historiographies each take to be real overlaps considerably. There's no reason not to suppose that, for the most part, they are talking about two different ways in which the same reality shows itself, a reality that has no ultimate revelation but many possible ones.

People doing both kinds of historiography can talk with each other, though usually today only by adopting the academic historiographer's more parsimonious take on reality. Nevertheless, these two kinds of historiography differ because they are about different ways in which the real reveals itself, different effects in history, and different futures opened by those effects. One historiography includes seeing that world as a world in which God makes Himself manifest in and through history, and the other doesn't. There's no middle ground between those two views.

### **Reading Literally**

That brings me to the third issue: What does it mean to read literally? Medieval thinkers had already thought about the issue, and they divided readings of scripture into two categories, one of which has three subdivisions: We can read literally (in accordance with history), and we can read spiritually. Spiritual reading includes reading scripture as allegorical (a teaching about the church and faith), tropological (the demands scripture makes on individuals), or anagogical (what it teaches about the future of the church). Theologians didn't think that one of these ways of reading necessarily excludes the others. In fact, Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) explicitly argued that any spiritual sense of scripture always comes from its

literal sense.<sup>6</sup> I'm not a Thomist, but my point about reading literally will be similar to his.

Today when we speak of a literal reading we ordinarily mean "in a real or actual sense," in other words "without metaphor, exaggeration, or distortion"<sup>7</sup> or perhaps more simply "as an accurate historical account," which sounds a lot like the medieval understanding. As you might suspect from what I've already said about history, the problem with that understanding of *literal* is that there is more to thinking that something is in accordance with history than might meet the modern eye. In fact, as I see it, many who purport to be giving literal readings of scripture are actually giving bad academic historiographic readings, using academic historiographer's assumptions about history yet insisting on historiographies that contradict those assumptions.<sup>8</sup> Those, for instance, who read Genesis 1 as describing a six-day or a six-thousand year physical creation of the universe approach scripture this way: they use the assumptions of academic historiography and science, but force their accounts to contradict those assumptions by injecting bad historiography and science into the accounts.

What, then, would be a better description of a literal reading? Using etymology once again as a tool for thinking about something rather than a proof, think about the word *literal* differently: to read a text literally is to read it "by the letters." Though it isn't without complications to put it this way, we could say that to read literally is to read something exactly as its words say they should be read. That isn't the same as the medieval meaning of the word *literal*, "in accordance with history," though it isn't necessarily disconnected from that medieval idea either. But before turning to the complications that history might inject, think more about the word *literal*.

It probably sounds straightforward to say that a literal reading of a text is one that understands it to say what it says rather than something else. On that view we might say that those who read Genesis 1–3 literally read it something like this:

There was a six-day period of creation, followed by a day of rest. Then God created Man, and placed him in a garden with numerous trees, one of which was the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God told

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6. As, for example, in Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, ch. 4, lec. 7.

7. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "literal."

8. See James E. Faulconer, "Myth and Religion: Theology as a Hermeneutic of Religious Experience," in *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture* (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2010), 72–73.

Man not to eat the fruit of that tree under penalty of death. Then he had Man name the animals. When Man discovered that all of the animals had a mate except him, God put him into an unconscious state, took a bone from his body, and created Woman. At some point a talking serpent challenged Woman to eat of the forbidden fruit, and she succumbed to his temptation. Then she shared what she ate with Man, and the two of them recognized that they were naked. Being embarrassed, they hid themselves in some bushes. When God discovered what they had done, he cursed the serpent to crawl on the ground, and he told Woman that she would have sorrow bearing children. He also cursed the earth so that Man would have difficulty working it. Then Man named Woman “Eve,” and after providing Adam and Eve with clothing, God cast them both out into the world outside the garden, remarking that they had become like one of the Gods.

Often when people speak of reading literally, they have something like what I have just said in mind, with the addition to that précis of one more detail: “This is a description of historical events.”

I contest that understanding of *literal*. As I see it, the above account of Genesis 1–3 is *not* a literal reading of those chapters, and not because there are details I omitted which others might think essential. It is not a literal reading of the text because it is, at best, a précis of the narrative rather than a reading of what the words of the text say. Indeed, it is a précis of one particular way of reading the chapters. Other interesting and perhaps mutually exclusive précis are possible.

To think more about how to understand the word *literal*, consider only the first few words of Genesis—and I will use English to make things easier for us all. (For my example I will proceed as if the Bible were written in English and the chapters at hand didn’t have editorial complexities.) The first five words of Genesis are: “In the beginning God created . . .” To read that phrase literally is to read what its letters say in this particular combination. But the question is, “What do they say?”

Of course one way to answer that question is trivial: I understand those words and the syntax that joins them. Almost any English speaker can do that. A reader can understand that phrase without believing in God. All that is required is a reasonable proficiency in English. But that can’t be what we mean by a literal reading, and the moment that we go beyond that, things become complicated.

If we go beyond that trivial meaning, one not uncommon response to how to understand scripture is to speak of it as my subjective response

to the scriptural text: I might say, “When I read those first five words of Genesis, I am reminded of the grandeur of God’s creation, and I feel small in comparison.” Believers often have those kinds of responses to scripture. Those responses aren’t insignificant, but they are not only not a literal reading of the text, they aren’t really an understanding *of the text*. (Nor are they, I would argue, what the Book of Mormon’s Nephi has in mind when he speaks of likening the scriptures to ourselves [1 Ne. 19:23].) So surely that’s not what we mean when we talk about understanding scripture literally. Scripture is more than a many-paged Rorschach test.

To read what the words formed by those letters say in the first five words of the Bible requires that I not only be able to grasp their plain English sense. I must also understand those words in relation to other words and ideas, in relation to traditions of reading, and particularly in relation to questions that they raise. I must already have in mind certain things, such as the range of things that the phrase “in the beginning” and the word “created” can mean, what kind of being God is, and what kind of a text we are looking at—historical narrative, ritual retelling, or something else. I must either have these things in mind, or have a question about them. For example, I might be unsure how to understand “in the beginning” and have a question about that.

A literal reading of the text requires that I think about all such questions, including my presuppositions about those for which I believe I have answers. In fact, perhaps the latter are the most important kinds of questions I can ask. There isn’t one and only one answer to the questions that arise when we begin to read literally, and the answers to them are so important that denominations are often established on the differences of the answers people give to them.

So, we can answer these kinds of questions in different ways, but we have to sort out the different answers if we are going to understand any particular literal meaning of the phrase under consideration. “In the beginning God created . . .” And we cannot forget that, at the same time, we have to sort out how the meaning of those five words is modified by the meaning of the words that follow them and the things that have been written about them, the actual context, the larger context, the way that we interpret the meaning of the text in relation to other things.

## THE BOOK WHICH THOU SHALT WRITE: THE BOOK OF MOSES AS PROPHETIC MIDRASH

*David Bokovoy*

One of the unique and fascinating features of Latter-day Saint Christianity is its reverence for sacred religious texts in addition to the Bible. For nearly two thousand years, the mainstream Christian tradition has defined its religious canon almost exclusively in terms of the books of the Old and New Testaments, with, of course, an occasional dose of the Apocrypha. Mormons certainly share this long-held Christian reverence for the Bible, yet at the same time, Latter-day Saints accept books produced primarily by the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith as part of an expanded religious canon. For Latter-day Saints, these scriptural texts include the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. This final example of unique LDS scripture includes two captivating texts purporting to present original writings from key biblical patriarchs including Adam, Enoch, Abraham, and the prophet Moses. The words of Moses appear in the pages of the Pearl of Great Price under the title “the Book of Moses.” As a segment of Joseph Smith’s revision of the King James Bible known by Latter-day Saints as the “Inspired Translation,” the Book of Moses represents a highly modified version of the opening chapters of Genesis.

Since the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith began production of his scriptural Book of Moses in 1830, major advancements in the academic sphere of biblical scholarship have provided significant insights into ancient Israelite textual and religious history. These discoveries carry ramifications for a critical assessment of this intriguing example of Mormon scripture. In this essay, I will present a basic summary of this approach. I will then illustrate that when read from a historical perspective, the Book of Moses follows an ancient venerable tradition of adopting and revising preexistent scripture into the formation of a new religious text. Finally, I



suggest that Latter-day Saints who accept the observations of mainstream biblical scholarship concerning the authorship of Genesis can define the Book of Moses as a scriptural example of inspired prophetic midrash.

In terms of his approach to biblical analysis, Joseph Smith was what we might refer to today as a “critical” reader of the text, paying close attention to both narrative and theological inconsistencies. He taught that in the production of the Bible, “ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests . . . committed many errors.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout his efforts to explicate the Bible, we find in Smith’s sermons a variety of references to alternate translations from the King James Bible (including the German), as well as allusions to the original Hebrew of the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> “There are many things in the Bible,” he declared, “which do not, as they now stand, accord with the revelations of the Holy Ghost to me.”<sup>3</sup> And the Mormon prophet was not afraid to point them out.

Shortly after the organization of the Church and the publication of the Book of Mormon, Smith began his next scriptural project of adding to and correcting the Bible. “It is hard to imagine now how this twenty-four-year-old came to believe that he could revise the Bible,” writes historian Richard Bushman. “[I]t was a striking demonstration of his outrageous confidence; to take on this hallowed book, he had to think of himself as a prophet among prophets.”<sup>4</sup> The Bible used for this project was a King James Version purchased on October 8, 1829, at the E.B. Grandin bookstore in Palmyra, New York, where the Book of Mormon was then being typeset.

Though there is no evidence of Smith taking into consideration the original languages of the Bible during his efforts to revise the Bible, Mormon scripture specifically refers to this project as a “translation.” In terms of its production, the translation tools Smith referred to as an important part of the production of the Book of Mormon—the Urim and Thummim—were not used in his translation of the Bible; instead, Smith

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1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 327.

2. “I am going to take exceptions to the present translation of the Bible in relation to these matters [interpreting prophecy]. Our latitude and longitude can be determined in the original Hebrew with far greater accuracy than in the English version. There is a grand distinction between the actual meaning of the prophets and the present translations.” Smith, 290–91.

3. Smith, 310.

4. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 132.

and his scribe would simply sit at a table while the Prophet would verbally dictate his revisions.<sup>5</sup> In June of 1830, Smith's scribe Oliver Cowdery first set to writing these significant changes that would eventually create a new opening text for the King James Bible.

Known today by Latter-day Saints as Moses 1, Smith's revelatory introduction provides a new *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) for the opening chapters of Genesis. The revelation includes a statement from God directly to Moses concerning his role as author: "And in a day when the children of Men shall esteem my words as naught and take many of them from the book which thou shalt write, behold, I will raise up another like unto thee; and they shall be had again among the children of men—among as many as shall believe" (Moses 1:41). With this statement, the Bible's stories of human prehistory, including the creation, the Fall, and the flood, are identified as narratives literally written by the prophet Moses himself as part of a visionary encounter he experienced on an "exceedingly high mountain" (v. 1). Smith would be the one like unto Moses who would restore Moses's lost words for the faithful. The book of Genesis is thus transformed into a book written by Moses—something that the biblical text itself never claims.

Smith's revelation of Moses 1 was originally an independent literary unit—a stand-alone revelation meant to provide a new beginning to the book of Genesis, not a revision of it. The original editorial introduction to the text read, "A Revelation given to Joseph the Revelator June 1830." However, Smith's independent revelation of the "words of Moses" set the stage for his subsequent revisionary efforts of the Bible.

From a literary perspective, the revelation features a biblical-like *inclusio* bracketing the revelation through a repetition of key words in the text's introduction and conclusion. The revelation begins with the superscription:

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5. "The original documents behind this publication are an 1828 KJV Bible (with Apocrypha) having various markings in pencil and ink, purchased by Smith and Oliver Cowdery in October 1829, and hundreds of sheets of paper with writing on both sides by various scribes. These documents reveal that Smith's revision progressed in stages; many passages contain not only revisions of the KJV but revisions of revisions of still earlier revisions. Other passages show evidence of revisions that were later discarded in favor of the original KJV reading. Some show later revisions of biblical chapters previously marked 'correct.' Joseph Smith clearly experimented with the Bible as he sought to bring its text in line with the insights of his revelations and understanding." Philip Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 50.

The Words of God, which he spake unto Moses at a time when Moses was caught up into an exceedingly high mountain. (Moses 1:1)

The document then concludes forty-one verses later with an editorial colophon that repeats key thematic elements from the beginning of the text:

These words were spoken unto Moses in the mount, the name of which shall not be known among the children of men. And now they are spoken unto you. Show them not unto any except them that believe, Even so. Amen. (Moses 1:42)

Interestingly, this editorial technique parallels the envelope structure that brackets the Bible's opening story of creation as a distinct literary unit:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. (Gen. 1:1)

These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created. (Gen. 2:4a)

For both Moses 1 and Genesis 1–2:4a, the *inclusio* creates a dramatic sense of closure to the accounts, marking out a clear beginning and conclusion to the two units.

Though the original revelation ended with *inclusio*, creating a clear sense of closure, Smith's revelation was truly a new beginning to a project that was both shocking and bold—especially for Smith's nineteenth-century Christianity. For centuries, readers of the Bible interpreted the book as a “privileged” text, not to be read or critiqued like normal books.<sup>6</sup> Scholar James Kugel explains this traditional interpretive approach:

Scripture is perfect and perfectly harmonious. By this I mean, first of all, that there is no mistake in the Bible, and anything that might look like a mistake—the fact that, for example, Gen. 15:13 asserts that the Israelites ‘will be oppressed for four hundred years’ in Egypt, while Exod. 12:41 speaks of 430 years, whereas a calculation based on biblical genealogies yielded a figure of 210 years—must therefore be an illusion to be clarified by proper interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

This method to interpreting the Bible sees the entire record as perfectly harmonious and, by extension, without error. It assumes that since some (if not all) of the Bible came directly from God, it should be interpreted according to its own unique rules that either harmonize or simply ignore inconsistencies. Throughout the centuries prior to Joseph Smith, when biblical texts appeared to contradict each other, qualified “professional” interpreters (such

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6. Adopting the term from Marc Zvi Brettler, *How to Read the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 1.

7. James Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), 20.

as scribes, rabbis, or priests) would reinterpret the plain meaning of words for their respective communities in a way that made the Bible conform both with itself and with later religious preferences. In some ways, Smith's project was an effort to harmonize the Bible and smooth out the difficulties in the text (thus making his effort similar to those of earlier Jewish and Christian commentators that preceded him). Smith, however, differed from these earlier efforts by harmonizing the text with his own doctrinal, historical, and theological convictions—his own revelations. Smith saw problems in the Bible, and these problems needed to be addressed.

Even still, Smith was not the first critical reader of the Bible to take seriously its various textual, narrative, and theological difficulties. The Western world that Smith inherited experienced a serious intellectual transformation in the seventeenth century that would ultimately impact the way many Americans would come to read the Bible, including the Mormon prophet. The long-held traditional approach of interpreting the Bible as a “privileged” text began to change with the rise of European rationalism. During this transformative era, European philosophers started to question many long-held assumptions regarding the Bible, including the very concept of biblical inerrancy. In sum, the Bible began to be read during this era as a “real” book (not just perfectly-harmonious scripture) that could be interpreted by the standard rules of logic.<sup>8</sup>

During the life of Joseph Smith, this new “enlightened” approach to reading the Bible produced a German school of interpretation in the theology departments of Protestant universities. The most influential member of this intellectual “school” was the German scholar Julius Wellhausen. In 1878 (thirty-four years after the death of the Prophet) Wellhausen synthesized previous scholarly discoveries in higher criticism

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8. New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman expresses this notion of the Bible as a “real book” rather than inerrant scripture: “Since the Bible is a book, it makes better sense to approach it the way one approaches books. There are certainly books in the world that don’t have any mistakes in them. But no one would insist that a particular phone book, chemistry textbook, or car instruction manual has absolutely no mistakes in it before reading it to see whether it does or not. Rather than thinking that the Bible cannot have mistakes, before looking to see if it does, why not see if it does, and only then decide whether it could. . . . If God created an error free book then it should be without errors. If what we have is not an error-free book, then it is not a book that God has delivered to us without errors.” Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible’s Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 117.

through the publication of his highly influential *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, Wellhausen's work did for biblical scholarship what Darwin's *Origin of the Species* accomplished for natural science. As Darwin's concept of evolutionary adaptation through natural selection has become central to modern evolutionary theory, so Wellhausen's work on historical criticism provides the foundation for modern scholarly assessments of the Bible.

In order to take seriously the types of textual and theological problems that Joseph Smith and others observed, *Prolegomena* separated the Bible, especially its first five books, into individual sources that Wellhausen dated to specific times in Israelite history. Wellhausen then put those sources back together again according to his own theory regarding the evolution of Israelite religion. Though in the years that followed not all of Wellhausen's interpretations of the development of various biblical sources were accepted by subsequent scholars, as of today almost all contemporary Biblicists recognize that the first five books of the Hebrew Bible were not written by a single author and that they are in fact a compilation of separate sources composed by different scribal schools of thought long after the time period associated with Moses.<sup>10</sup>

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9. Historically, the identification of textual duplicates led to the view of the Pentateuch as an amalgamation of separate sources. An early advocate of this position was Richard Simon (1603–1712). Simon maintained that the Pentateuch consisted of various documents, some of which derived from Moses, but he attributed most to Ezra in the post-exilic period. Following Simon, Jean Astruc (1684–1766) expressed the view that two separate sources appear in the book of Genesis, one that used Elohim (God) and the other the divine name Yahweh (LORD). In his articulation of source criticism, Astruc argued against the traditional view that Moses compiled the Pentateuch. Astruc's analysis prepared the way for further discussion concerning whether these sources were documents or simply fragments combined from other sources. These studies prepared the way for Wellhausen's groundbreaking synthesis of the Documentary Hypothesis. For a basic history, see Anthony F. Campbell and Mark A. O'Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations* (Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000), 1–9.

10. In recent years, some continental scholars have abandoned the traditional theory of documentary sources in the Pentateuch as a relevant model for explaining its development, and in its place adopted a "Fragmentary" or "Supplementary" Hypothesis. The so-called Fragmentary Hypothesis was inaugurated by Johann Severin Vater in his work *Commentar über den Pentateuch: Mit Einleitungen zu den einzelnen Abschnitten, der eingeschalteten Übersetzung von Dr. Alexander Geddes's merkwürdigeren kritischen und exegetischen Anmerkungen, und einer Abhandlung*

This perspective brought into question the traditional Jewish and Christian belief that the prophet Moses wrote the Bible's first five books. Though never stated anywhere in the books themselves, this tradition regarding Mosaic authorship developed early in Jewish history.<sup>11</sup> The Bible indicates that Moses stayed on Mount Sinai in the presence of God for forty days and forty nights (Ex. 24:18, 34:28; Deut. 9:9, 10:10). Jewish interpreters eventually came to the conclusion that this was too long of a period for Moses to have only received the laws that the Bible itself identifies as the revelation Moses received.<sup>12</sup> Surely, they reasoned, in forty days, Moses must have received more. Traditions therefore developed of Moses receiving the entire written Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy) at this time. Eventually, Jewish rabbis even expanded this view to include the entire oral tradition that provided an authoritative interpretation of the written law. Historically speaking, Smith's Book of Moses revelation is an heir to this expansive interpretive tradition.

In contrast to this tradition concerning Moses, most contemporary scholars believe that the Pentateuch began to take its preliminary shape in Jerusalem sometime during the late eighth century BCE.<sup>13</sup> This was the time period of the prophet Isaiah and the Judean king Hezekiah. With the emergence of Jerusalem as an important political center, together with the

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*über Moses und Verfasser des Pentateuchs* (Halle: Waisenhaus-Buchhandlung, 1802–5), see especially 393–94. This assessment does not mean to suggest that continental studies have rejected the basic premise of separate sources within the Pentateuch. As Konrad Schmid notes regarding this recent European trend, “The newer contributions to Pentateuchal research from Europe do not aim at overthrowing the Documentary Hypothesis, rather, they strive to understand the composition of the Pentateuch in the most appropriate terms, which . . . includes ‘documentary’ elements as well.” Konrad Schmid, “Has European Scholarship Abandoned the Documentary Hypothesis?” in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Brauch J. Schwartz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 17–18.

11. For the evolution of the term *torah* (law) in the Hebrew Bible from laws Moses gave to eventually the Law (meaning first five books), see Marc Zvi Brettler, “My Bible: A Jew’s Perspective,” in *The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously*, eds. Marc Z. Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 26–31.

12. Marc Zvi Brettler, “Torah,” in *Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.

13. William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 5.

rise of the Assyrian empire, we encounter Judean scribes beginning to collect and record Israelite oral traditions, as well as composing new religious literature that eventually made its way into the pages of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>14</sup> The rise of the Assyrian empire to political power led to the development of what historians refer to as “scribalization” in the ancient Near East, and this movement greatly affected the kingdoms of both Israel and Judah.

Israelite and Judean scribes trained and influenced by their Assyrian conquerors were the authors who produced the written sources used to create the Pentateuch. When we consider the issue of dating these various texts, relative dating is possible with quite a bit of confidence; it is simply in the specifics that this effort admittedly gets a bit challenging.<sup>15</sup> On this topic, there exists considerable academic debate. Scholars will probably never know with any degree of certainty how to precisely date all of this material. New theories are constantly being presented; so conceptually, readers need to allow for a bit of flexibility. However, there are some important issues concerning which scholars do have quite a bit of confidence that carry significant ramifications for a critical assessment of the LDS Book of Moses. To quote David Carr, many scholars are “agnostic on whether there was any writing of biblical materials in tenth-century Judah, given the uncertainties surrounding it.”<sup>16</sup>

Archeological evidence suggests that writing itself was probably only beginning to take place in Israel and Judah during this time period.<sup>17</sup> This

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14. See the summary provided by Michael L. Satlow, *How the Bible Became Holy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 73–74. David Carr writes in his most recent assessment, “Though there were potential early cores behind separate Pentateuchal traditions, such as the ancestral or Exodus-Moses traditions, most specialists in the study of the Pentateuch now think that the first proto-Pentateuchal narrative, one extending from creation to Moses, dated to the exile at the earliest.” David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 359.

15. To reveal my own feeling on the matter, I currently hold that the documentary sources identified by Wellhausen were developed in the following sequential order: E, J, P, D; see David Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2013).

16. Carr, *Formation*, 359.

17. Here is how biblical scholar Seth Sanders presents what we know to be true via the archeological evidence: “In the tenth-century the first records of an inland script appear in Israel, but they are in an unstandardized Canaanite. We have alphabetic writing and official seals from the probable period of the United Monarchy in the tenth century but the writing is not yet Hebrew and



means that during the era of Saul, David, and Solomon, a written form of Hebrew was only beginning to develop, and when it finally did the written form of Hebrew derived from the earlier Phoenician script. Historians actually see this happening in terms of Hebrew/Canaanite inscriptions.<sup>18</sup> The archeological evidence indicates that biblical figures such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and any other individuals prior to the time of the divided monarchy most likely did not possess an actual written language. If they did, it certainly would not have been Hebrew, and we would have no idea what that script possibly could have been. One could make an argument that Moses might have possibly known how to write in an Egyptian hieroglyphic script and that Abraham could have written in some type of early cuneiform, but given the complexity of these systems and the fact that such knowledge was highly restricted to those devoted to years and years of highly technical scribal education, this hypothesis seems highly unlikely. More importantly, there is simply no historical evidence to support the idea that these men actually wrote records.

Our current society places so much emphasis upon literacy that we tend to look back at human history and assume that everyone in the past was just like us, but this is simply not the case. Prior to the modern era, most people did not have the time or opportunity to go to school in order to learn to read and write complicated ancient scripts. After the alphabet

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the seals are wordless. Standardized local script-languages appear in monumental form hand in hand with local states in the Levant by the late ninth century. The first deliberate vernaculars are royal tools. Hebrew arose alongside these written language and was produced in both the north and south of Israel by the beginning of the eighth century B.C.E. through the sixth century B.C.E.” Seth L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew (Traditions)* (University of Illinois Press, 2011), 106. See also the recent historical assessment provided by William M. Schniedewind, *A Social History of Hebrew: Its Origins Through the Rabbinic Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

18. Biblical scholar David Carr has made this clear in his most recent analysis of the Pentateuchal sources: “It is plausible to suggest that these early kingdoms [Judah and Israel] developed a preliminary literary system. . . . A combination of archaeological and biblical evidence, critically read, suggests the emergence of a new kind of textual system in the tenth and ninth centuries, one built on the Phoenician script (and potentially depending on other elements of the Phoenician system), one influenced in some ways by Egyptian educational-literary prototypes, and one shared between the Southern and Northern highlands, along with some areas of the Transjordan that were dominated at times by Israel-Judah (e.g., Moab).” Carr, *Formation*, 385.



had been developed, and prior to the days of the printing press, we still find that by the end of the Middle Ages in Europe, the literacy rate was approximately only 25% of the population. Going back further into the world of the Bible, as expected, this percentage drops dramatically:

Though the figures differ depending on place and period, literacy was always restricted to a small segment of society. The Mesopotamians were the first humans to write, but less than 5 percent of the populations were actually literate. In Egypt the rate of literacy was slightly higher than in Mesopotamia, but even the most generous estimates put it as no more than 7 percent of the population. In the classical world the situation was not much different. Greece had an overall literacy rate of about 10 percent, yet it was still predominately an oral culture, rhetoric being the foundation, and eloquence the aim, of education.<sup>19</sup>

This archeological assessment reflects the fact that neither the act of writing itself nor references to actual written texts holds an important place in the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Writing and the production of written scriptural texts was simply not an important issue in early Israelite history.<sup>20</sup> The authors of the Bible's first three books did not conceptualize a time period when inspired prophets such as Moses would sit down and actually *write* scriptural texts. Instead, even in Exodus, the focus of transmitting revelation from God is on orality rather than textuality. Therefore, the evidence of historical criticism in relationship to the Book of Moses indicates that the sources that Smith revised to read as texts written by Moses himself are in fact Judean and Israelite scribal production that were beginning to take shape as written material during the Neo-Assyrian time period when Judea was an occupied vassal state.

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19. Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 10.

20. Schniedewind writes: "During the early Iron Age, the term Hebrew writing is problematic. It is better to employ a local geographical term like Israelite writing or a more general term like Levantine or Canaanite writing. Though the ancient Israelites undoubtedly had their own local dialects and speech communities, there is little evidence to suggest that they developed an independent writing system or scribal community." Schniedewind, *A Social History of Hebrew*, 62. It's really during the eighth century BCE that we begin to see the emergence of serious scribalization in ancient Israel and Judah, though the epigraphic evidence of "Canaanite" writing suggests some form of Israelite literacy existed in the 9<sup>th</sup> century; see, for example, Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 134–35.

Yet even without the insights gained into Israelite textual and religious history through historical criticism, this assertion really should be apparent to all careful readers of Smith's revelation. Moses 1 constantly invokes the voice of an omniscient narrator speaking about Moses in third person. Statements such as "And *he* saw God face to face, and *he* talked with him, and the glory of God was upon *Moses*; therefore *Moses* could endure his presence. And God spake unto *Moses*" (Moses 1:2–3; emphasis added), appear all throughout the course of Smith's entire revelation. This pattern stands in stark contrast to the first person biographical formulation of Smith's subsequent scriptural text, the Book of Abraham.

Moreover, later in his prophetic ministry, Smith gave a sermon in which he claimed to recreate the original form of Genesis 1:1 as written by the original inspired author: "In the beginning the head of the Gods brought forth the Gods,' or, as others have translated it, 'The head of the Gods called the Gods together.'"<sup>21</sup> Thus putting the three texts (Genesis 1:1, Moses 2:1, and Joseph Smith urtext) together for comparative purposes, we can see that from Smith's own perspective the Book of Moses was not the original form of the Priestly creation narrative:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. (Gen. 1:1 KJV)

In the beginning I created the heaven, and the earth upon which thou standest. (Moses 2:1–2)

In the beginning the head of the Gods brought forth the Gods. (Joseph Smith urtext)

Therefore, if Smith's Book of Moses does not recreate what the biblical prophet himself actually wrote, how might a believing Latter-day Saint assess this important component of the LDS canon?

In presenting itself as words once literally written by the prophet Moses himself, the Book of Moses follows an ancient literary pattern for revelatory texts. This same type of genre is seen in later Jewish pseudepigrapha and Rabbinic midrash, as well as within the Bible itself. The term "midrash" refers to a method of interpreting biblical material that fills in literary and legal gaps featured in the biblical sources. This process, which eventually becomes a highly sophisticated rabbinic activity, has its origins in the Hebrew Bible.

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21. Joseph Smith et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1948 printing), 6:475.

The biblical books of Jeremiah and Isaiah, for example, adopt and reconfigure earlier religious texts. This process of creating new scriptural material through preexistent source material can be seen within a critical assessment of the book of Isaiah itself. Scholars typically divide the book of Isaiah into three historical sections: First Isaiah, written mainly in the eighth century BCE (more or less the initial thirty-nine chapters); Deutero-Isaiah, written during the mid-sixth century BCE (chapters 40–55); and Third Isaiah, written during the late sixth or early fifth century BCE (chapters 56–66). The later contributors to the Isaiah corpus intentionally adapt the words and themes that appear in First Isaiah. A similar process occurs in the books of Chronicles, which include a creative rewriting of the material in Samuel and Kings. Many of the biblical Psalms include texts that reinterpret earlier biblical passages. And the attributes of God in Exodus 34:6–7 appear reworked into several later biblical sources, including Jonah 4:2 and Psalm 86:15.

Later Jewish theologians continued this tradition through the production of scriptural texts that adapted and added onto preexisting “biblical” material. The Dead Sea Scroll community at Qumran produced a type of biblical commentary known as *Pesharim* that interpreted earlier material in light of the community’s history. This is the same process that we encounter in the New Testament, particularly the book of Matthew, which adopts and recontextualizes scriptural material from the Hebrew Bible as messianic prophecies pointing to Jesus. We find this process at work in the writings of the first century Jewish historian Josephus as well. In his twenty-volume history, *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus created a new rewritten Bible of sorts by quoting portions of the Septuagint verbatim and then adding both new material and his own commentary directly to the narrative. From this same time period, the Hellenized Jew, Philo of Alexandria, combined Jewish texts with concepts of Platonic philosophy, thus creating new religious material based upon the Bible. Smith’s *Book of Moses*, therefore, follows a long history of reformulating and adding onto biblical material in the creation of a new religious text.

When we survey this material, we find that pseudonymous authors from antiquity often appear identified as authors of many of these texts, including much of what appears in the Bible. In fact, we must keep in mind that from a mainstream scholarly perspective, despite their scriptural status, even the laws that Moses declares in the Pentateuch were actually written by later Israel and Judean scribes and subsequently attributed to Moses. Later Jewish books (held as “scripture” by various communities)

appear attributed to Adam, Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Elijah, and Ezekiel (just to name a few). In reality, these religious texts that attribute the scriptural account to an ancient figure do not recreate words he or she once literally wrote. Instead, as one scholar has observed, “[a]ttribution (attaching names to Biblical books) belongs to the realm of literary scholarship, and has little to do with the intentions of the composers of works. It isn’t so much about what an author did write, but rather it is about what he would have written (or; from the perspective of ancient literary interpreters, what he must have written).”<sup>22</sup> Taking into consideration the observations scholars have made concerning the historical origins of the book of Genesis, the Book of Moses can be seen as an account of what Moses, Israel’s great lawgiver, would have written; or, from the perspective of Smith’s revelatory text, what Moses *must* have written.

The Book of Moses, in a sense, is similar, therefore, to other ancient scriptural texts, including the second-century BCE book of Jubilees. This ancient account reports that during the first year of the Exodus, Moses experienced a forty-day epiphany on a sacred mountain. On this occasion, God shared with his prophet a panoramic vision concerning the history of the world (see Jubilees 1:1–4). According to the account, God intended this vision and the subsequent testimony Moses would record to provide a witness to the descendants of Israel concerning the covenants of the Lord. The account presents God’s words to Moses:

Set your mind on every thing which I shall tell you on this mountain, and write it in a book so that [Israel’s] descendants might see that I have not abandoned them on account of all of the evil which they have done to instigate transgression of the covenant which I am establishing between me and you today on Mount Sinai for their descendants. (Jubilees 1:5–6)

The account then moves into a citation and reformulation of the early chapters of Genesis, depicting this material as the revelation concerning creation God gave to Moses and that Moses, in turn, put to writing. This shows that Smith’s Book of Moses follows a significant trend in ancient Jewish traditions. The Book of Moses not only defends the inspired nature of Genesis’s prehistory, it elevates the text to a revelatory status by using the biblical prophet Moses as a conduit for Smith’s own revelations that corrected the Bible.

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22. Jed Wyrick, *The Ascension of Authorship: Attribution and Canon Formation in Jewish, Hellenistic, and Christian Traditions* (Cambridge: Department of Comparative Literature, 2004), 80.

Like the Book of Jubilees, Smith's revelation follows a pattern first witnessed in ancient Judean history as a response to Hellenistic concerns. Greek philosophical traditions that influenced later Jewish thought held a text like Genesis with suspicion because it features accounts that many Greek philosophers would associate with the category of myth rather than history. Early Jewish efforts to identify the Pentateuch with a historical author such as Moses derived in part from an effort to respond to Greek criticism. The idea of a prophet writing scripture (such as the Book of Genesis) emerged as a late Judean concept, long after the time period of Moses. Similarly, Smith's revelation adds religious depth and authoritative legitimacy to the opening chapters of the Bible.

One of the ancient Jewish texts that parallels the type of structure in the Book of Moses is 1 Enoch. A second-temple Jewish text with literary layers that existed at least as early as the third century BCE, 1 Enoch was originally composed in Aramaic long after the time associated with the biblical Enoch. The book contains five separate segments in a way that reflects the traditional Jewish notion of the Torah consisting of five books.<sup>23</sup> These have been preserved in translation and remain part of the scriptural canon of the Ethiopian Christian church.

1 Enoch features revised segments of the opening chapters of Genesis (including the story of the "Sons of God" in Genesis 6:1–4). These revisions are presented as a vision received by the biblical patriarch Enoch and begin with an editorial superscription or introduction that speaks about Enoch in third person:

The blessing of Enoch: with which he blessed the elect and the righteous who would be present on the day of tribulation at (the time of) the removal of all the ungodly ones. And Enoch, the blessed and righteous man of the Lord, took up (his parable) while his eyes were open and he saw, and said . . . (1 Enoch 1:1–2a)<sup>24</sup>

The account then transitions to a depiction of Enoch's own words:

(This is) a holy vision from the heavens which the angels showed me: and I heard from them everything and I understood. I look not for this generation but for the distant one that is coming. (1 Enoch 1:2b)

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23. For the various elements in 1 Enoch and an analysis of their historical development, see George W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch: A Commentary of the Book of Enoch Chapters 1–36, 81–108* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 7–8, 21–26.

24. As translated by E. Isaac in James Charlesworth, ed. *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983–87), 1:13.

Following an introduction that runs through 1 Enoch 5, the text transitions to a revised version of the source's story of the Sons of God in Genesis 6:1–4. 1 Enoch, therefore, directly parallels the structure for the Book of Moses. The Book of Moses begins with an editorial introduction that speaks about Moses in third person and then transitions to Moses using direct first person speech followed by a revised version of material found in the Book of Genesis. In so doing, both texts present a revised version of Judean documentary sources as revelations dictated by earlier prophetic figures. Known as pseudepigrapha (meaning “false superscriptions or titles”), this type of literature is a very common feature in ancient Jewish scriptural texts.

Even many of the books in the New Testament are pseudepigraphic works attributed to early Christian leaders. The New Testament, for instance, contains an epistle depicted as a letter written by Paul to his missionary companion Titus. This is one of a series of epistles attributed to Paul that biblical scholars almost universally believe were not written by the apostle, including the epistles to Timothy and the Ephesians. Colossians and 2 Thessalonians are also held by many critical scholars as pseudepigraphic texts. As Bart Ehrman explains,

Letters allegedly written by Paul continued to be produced in the second and later centuries [i.e. long after his death]; among those that still survive are a third letter to the Corinthians, a letter addressed to the church in the town of Laodicea, and an exchange of correspondence between Paul and the famous Greek philosopher Seneca.<sup>25</sup>

These later texts illustrate how the pseudepigraphical letters of Paul in the New Testament follow a common pattern in early Christian writings. Indeed, the same holds true for other scriptural sources from the New Testament. Most New Testament scholars, for instance, do not believe that Peter was the author of the two epistles ascribed to him in the Bible nor that the Epistle of Jude was written by the brother of Jesus and James.<sup>26</sup>

Other pseudepigraphic texts not included in the traditional New Testament canon include such works as the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Judas. In fact, a critical survey of early Christian literature, including

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25. Bart Ehrman, *New Testament: An Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 292–93.

26. Historically, Jesus's brother Jude would have been a lower class, Aramaic-speaking Jew. The author of “Jude,” however, was highly educated in Jewish apocryphal writings and possessed an ability to write in Greek. The author, for example, cites the book of 1 Enoch as scripture in verse 14.

the books that appear in the New Testament, illustrates that presenting a religious text as the words of a famous Christian leader was not simply a pervasive tradition, it was the norm.

Attributing a literary work to another person who held an important religious role, such as a prophet or apostle, elevated the religious status of the document as sacred literature.<sup>27</sup> In his recent work focusing upon early Christian writings that follow this trend, Ehrman explains:

The single most important motivation for authors to claim they were someone else in antiquity . . . was to get a hearing for their views. If you were an unknown person, but had something really important to say and wanted people to hear you—not so they could praise you, but so they could learn the truth—one way to make that happen was to pretend you were someone else, a well-known author, a famous figure, an authority.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, claiming that your revelation was actually given to Enoch, Isaiah, Abraham, or Paul gave the work a type of religious credence.

This interpretation of the purpose of pseudepigraphy works well for many of the early Christian examples that Ehrman's study focuses upon. However, imposing the same idea upon the Book of Moses is problematic. Smith did not need to attribute his revelation (Moses 1) to the biblical Moses in order to provide his revelation with greater validity. As prophet of God, in addition to translating the Book of Mormon, Smith was already dictating his own personal revelations as scripture in 1830. There was no need for the Mormon prophet to bolster his religious views by claiming that they were Moses's. Instead, Moses 1 presents the opening chapters of Genesis as a revelation given to Moses on a mountaintop. It therefore elevates the religious authenticity of the Bible, not Smith's revelations. From this angle, the Book of Moses may be defined by believing Latter-

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27. James C. VanderKam, *From Revelation to Canon: Studies in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 23–25; G. W. E. Nickelsburg, "Revealed Wisdom as a Criterion for Inclusion and Exclusion: From Jewish Sectarianism to Early Christianity," in *To See Ourselves as Others See*, ed. J. Neusner and E. S. Frerichs (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 73–91; G. W. E. Nickelsburg, "The Nature and Function of Revelation in 1 Enoch, Jubilees, and Some Qumranic Documents," in *Pseudepigraphic Perspectives: The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Esther G. Chazon et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 91–120.

28. Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (New York: HarperOne: 2012), 31.

day Saints as inspired prophetic midrash. And as illustrated, Smith's work follows an ancient religious literary pattern for scripture.

Yet ancient authors who produced a religious source as the words of an earlier prophet or sage did not always seek to identify the text as a document that ultimately derived from that authoritative figure (though such an attempt was common). Instead, ancient authors occasionally sought to produce a text wherein one who communicated with God could serve as a type of conduit for the disclosure of divine knowledge. This is one of the ways Moses can be understood in Smith's revelation. For those who accept Smith's Book of Moses as inspired scripture, Israel's great lawgiver serves as an instrument or conduit for the disclosure of the divine knowledge that appears in Genesis. The text, therefore, accords with Smith's role as a Restorer, bridging the spiritual and scriptural gaps between the ancient and modern worlds.

Pseudonymous authors legitimize the scriptural authority of the text. In this sense, the pseudonymous writer is "not so much creator or author as he is tradent and guarantor."<sup>29</sup> Hence, the ancient art of pseudepigraphy should not be viewed through modern notions of fraud or forgeries. This point is well-articulated by Annette Yoshiko Reed:

When grappling with the presence of Pauline pseudepigrapha in the New Testament . . . scholars . . . have cautioned against assuming that this ancient literary practice was necessarily motivated by any radical intent to replace an earlier text or tradition. Like the prophetic pseudepigraphy that formed second and third Isaiah, for instance, the Pauline pseudepigraphy of the Pastoral Epistles may be better understood in terms of a claim to faithful oral reception and written transmission of Pauline teachings and/or as a claim to the inspired interpretation and faithful continuation of Pauline tradition. Rather than a rebellion against the textual authority of Paul's own writings, this literary choice may reflect a conservatism vis-à-vis received tradition, forged in settings in which its preservation seemed, to some, to be endangered by competing readings of the meanings of Paul's written words.<sup>30</sup>

A Latter-day Saint who accepts the arguments of Higher Criticism could adopt Reed's perspective of pseudepigrapha as a reflection for what the Book of Moses does for Genesis.

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29. Annette Yoshiko Reed, "Pseudepigraphy, Authorship and the Reception of the 'the Bible' in Late Antiquity," in *The Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. DiTommason and L. Turcescu (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 477.

30. Reed, 475–76.



Like Wellhausen and other nineteenth-century critical thinkers, Joseph Smith recognized that the Bible was a product of human hands. Its problems needed to be addressed. Smith identified some of these issues, and he attempted to correct the errors (as he perceived them) via his new translation. However, unlike Wellhausen—whose critical approach to the Bible humanized the work—Smith’s critical assessment represents a type of religious conservatism that seeks to elevate the inspired authenticity of the Bible by providing Genesis’s prehistory with a new interpretive lens attributed to Israel’s great lawgiver.

Adopting this perspective, the Book of Moses can be seen to conceptually parallel Smith’s reworking of his United Firm revelations (D&C 78, 82, 92, 96). These revelations show signs of significant revisionary efforts that develop over time. Part of this growth occurred as a result of Smith’s desire to keep hidden from outsiders the identities of the men whose names appear in the revelations. The original revelations referred openly to men who were participating in Smith’s United Firm, an organization that supervised the management of the Church’s financial enterprises and distribution of properties from 1832 to 1834. The changes made to these financial revelations concerning the United Firm included more than simply a substitution of ancient code names. They were intentionally revised in order to sound like ancient texts. Smith changed his own name to Enoch and Gazelam, and he gave “Adamic-like” names to his cohorts: Newel K. Whitney was changed to Ahashdah; Edward Partridge to Alam; John Whitmer to Horah; A. Sidney Gilbert to Mahalaleel; Martin Harris to Mahemson; Oliver Cowdery to Olihah; Sidney Rigdon to Pelagoram; W.W. Phelps to Shalemanasseh; Frederick G. Williams to Shederlaomach; and John Johnson to Zombre.<sup>31</sup> Anachronistic Bible references that originally appeared in the texts were substituted for terms connected with an earlier Adamic setting. The word “Israel” appears changed to a more archaic “Zion.” John Johnson’s lineage through Joseph of Egypt is changed to that of Seth, and even the name Jesus Christ was switched to describe its Adamic form, “Son of Ahman.”<sup>32</sup> These changes allowed the revelations to appear as ancient rather than modern.

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31. In the words of Christopher Smith, “Significant additions and deletions were made in order to give these revelations an authentically ancient veneer.” Christopher C. Smith, “The Inspired Fictionalization of the 1835 United Firm Revelations,” *Claremont Journal of Mormon Studies* 1 (2011): 16, 25.

32. Smith, 25.

This objective behind these changes is made clear in the way Joseph revised the revelation that eventually became Doctrine and Covenants 78. In the 1835 version of this revelation, the Prophet added the clause, “the Lord spoke unto Enoch, saying . . .” to the beginning of the revelation. This effectively transformed the *Sitz im Leben* for this nineteenth-century economic text concerning the United Firm to read as if it had been given to the ancient prophet Enoch:

Hearken unto me saith the Lord your God O ye who are ordained unto the high priests hood of my church, who have assembled [yourselves together]. (Book of Commandments and Revelations)<sup>33</sup>

The Lord spake unto Enoch, saying, Hearken unto me saith the Lord your God, who are ordained unto the high priesthood of my church, who have assembled yourselves together. (D&C 75:1; 1835 edition)

The Lord spake unto Joseph Smith, Jun., saying: Hearken unto me, saith the Lord your God, who are ordained unto the high priesthood of my church, who have assembled yourselves together. (D&C 78:1; current edition)

Moreover, the 1835 edition of the revelation Smith published was given the title, “The Order of the Lord to Enoch, for the purpose of establishing the poor.” These changes to Joseph’s revelations are significant. They illustrate that the Prophet viewed his efforts to express the word of God as a malleable endeavor.

From a historical perspective, an analogy, therefore, can be drawn between Smith’s United Firm revelations and the Book of Moses. In both instances, we find Smith reworking previous religious texts into the prophetic vision of biblical figures. In the Book of Moses, Genesis is placed into the context of Moses’s revelation; in Smith’s United Firm texts, the Mormon prophet’s economic revelations were reworked into the vision(s) of Enoch. From a theological perspective, these revised revelations illustrate Smith’s understanding of dispensationalism (the idea that history repeats itself in types and shadows from dispensation to dispensation).<sup>34</sup> This unique perspective gave Smith precedence to rewrite scriptural texts (including his own) into the words of ancient prophets.

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33. Revelation Book 1, p. 196, as published Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Manuscript Revelation Books*, facsimile ed. Vol. 1 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 368–69.

34. This thesis is argued in Smith, “Inspired Fictionalization,” 30.

A revelation given to Joseph Smith in 1841 depicts God's perspective concerning the prophet: "I give unto you my servant Joseph to be a presiding elder over all my church, to be a translator, a revelator, a seer, and prophet" (D&C 124:125). As a prophet and seer, Smith translated religious texts that Latter-day Saints define as scripture comparable to the Bible. However, that translation process was in most instances non-traditional; most of Smith's translation projects did not involve working with a text in a foreign language (the Book of Abraham being an obvious exception). In nineteenth-century American English, the verb "translate" carried a variety of nuances (much as it does today). In addition to "the act of turning into another language," it could also mean "interpretation," or a "version." Its primary meaning was "the act of removing or conveying from one place to another."<sup>35</sup> Each of these 1828 definitions works well as a characterization of the Joseph Smith Translation, a revelatory work that created a new interpretation or new version of the Bible.

In his efforts to combine his revelatory work with past dispensations, Smith never produced traditional translations by working with another language.<sup>36</sup> For example, he does not seem to have directly used the plates to produce the Book of Mormon in his act of translation.<sup>37</sup> While Smith made use of the Egyptian papyri to produce the Book of Abraham, the role those papyri directly played in the process is unclear. And we know by both his inspired translation of the Bible and the revealed text "translated from parchment written and hid up by [John the beloved disciple]

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35. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*; 1828 facsimile ed. (Anaheim: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1967), s. v. "translate."

36. Richard van Wagoner and Steven Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 48–68.

37. On the translation process, Bushman writes: "By the time Cowdery arrived, translator and scribe were no longer separated. Emma said she sat at the same table with Joseph, writing as he dictated, with nothing between them, and the plates wrapped in a linen cloth on the table. When Cowdery took up the job of scribe, he and Joseph translated in the same room where Emma was working. Joseph looked in the seerstone, and the plates lay covered on the table. Neither Joseph nor Oliver explained how translation worked, but Joseph did not pretend to look at the "reformed Egyptian" words, the language on the plates, according to the book's own description. The plates lay covered on the table, while Joseph's head was in a hat looking at the seerstone, which by this time had replaced the interpreters." Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 71–72.

himself,” found in Doctrine and Covenants 7,<sup>38</sup> that an actual copy of an ancient source was unnecessary for his translations.

Smith’s translation work appears to reflect his understanding of divine creation. It is a process whereby structure or order is given to preexistent chaos. In translating, Smith was imitating deity and His creative work. The Mormon Prophet understood “translation” as a process whereby something (or someone) was “carried off” or “moved from one place to another.” For example, in his revised version of Genesis, Smith referred to ancient men of faith who entered into the order of the Son of God and were “translated and taken up into heaven” (Gen. 14:32, JST). Thus, in “translating,” Smith took something that existed in the physical or temporal world such as the Egyptian papyri he used to create the Book of Abraham (or even the Bible itself) and translated that material into something of increased spiritual importance.

The Book of Moses offers not only correction but additions to the sources from the Bible Latter-day Saints hold as both inspired and imperfect. For example, it provides the opening chapters of Genesis with a new *Sitz im Leben*—a mountain—that repackages the Pentateuch as a temple-based revelation.<sup>39</sup> This new scripture serves an essential role in Smith’s effort to not only correct some of the Bible’s errors as he saw them, but to spiritually bind previous dispensations with the modern era. As a religious translator, he made known that which was hidden from the world.

As this brief study has shown, the modern advancements in biblical studies carry significant ramifications for a critical assessment of the Book of Moses. While it is true that these insights force us to the conclusion that perhaps some traditional assumptions regarding the nature of Smith’s revelatory texts may on some levels be incorrect, the inspired validity of his work is an issue beyond the realm of scientific analysis. In terms of the Book of Moses, Smith sought to raise the Bible’s divine authenticity by bringing the book into harmony with his own revelatory experiences. To quote LDS scholar Phillip Barlow, “If certain truths were not originally included in the Bible, they are truths nonetheless and readers will be edified by studying them. It is not the text of the Bible as such, but rather the truths of God that are sacred.”