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Roundtable: The BYU New Testament Commentary

The BYU New Testament Commentary: “It Doth Not Yet Appear What It Shall Be”¹

Philip L. Barlow

DESPITE HARBORING AN ANTI-INTELLECTUAL STRAND, the Mormon people have fashioned a rich intellectual heritage for a movement so young and religiously lay oriented. Latter-day Saints are also a “People of the Book” if ever there was one—devoted to not one, but four collections of scripture. Remarkably, this vibrant culture has yet to produce an estimable commentary on the Bible, which Apostle James Talmage characterized, in a treatise of quasi-canonical influence for most of the twentieth century, as “the foremost of her standard works, first among the books which have been proclaimed as her written guides in faith and doctrine.”² Various LDS authors have offered devotional contributions and doctrinal declarations, but no deeply informed and comprehensive

1. See 1 John 3:2. While the judgments and questions that follow are strictly my responsibility, I am grateful to diverse biblical scholars over the years who have, sometimes inadvertently, stimulated my thinking about the Bible and the prospects of a professional-quality Mormon commentary. Examples include Grant Adamson, Clifton Black, David Cassel, Kent Jackson, Mike Pope, and Chad Quaintance.

2. James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, rev. ed. (1984; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 214. Under the initiating influence of President Ezra Taft Benson, the church has since the 1980s elevated the place of the Book of Mormon in its canon.

treatment from within the movement has emerged comparable to the best that exists in older traditions. This is a cavernous absence.

Glad tidings, then, that scholars centered at Brigham Young University seek to address this lack by initiating the multivolume BYU New Testament Commentary. The series aspires in the coming years to “combine the best of ancient linguistic and historical scholarship with Latter-day Saint doctrinal perspectives.” It will examine each New Testament book “almost word by word, exploring relationships between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.”³ The project has been under development for more than a decade. Two volumes have now appeared in electronic form, with plans for hardcover editions: Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, and S. Kent Brown, *The Testimony of Luke*. Other contributions slated to appear are John W. Welch on Matthew; Julie M. Smith, Mark; Eric Huntsman, John; Andrew Skinner and John Welch, Acts; Richard Draper and Michael Rhodes, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Hebrews; and John Welch and Brent J. Schmidt, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude. Assignments for the remaining canonical books remain to be finalized. The project’s steering committee intends not to impose a uniform framework on authors of the respective books, so we may anticipate a variety of approaches. Indeed, the organizers reserve the option of sponsoring more than one scholarly volume on individual New Testament books, following a precedent set by the well-regarded Anchor Bible Series, so we may plausibly consider an explicit range of judgments on shared topics as well. The preliminary volumes do interact somewhat with the up-to-date critical edition of the Greek text and mainstream biblical scholarship. The commentary will expose more Latter-day Saints than heretofore to modern scholarship beyond the confines of LDS tradition, thereby helping them better understand that to which they are devoted.

In addition to thinking about the forthcoming series as a whole, this essay calls occasionally upon Kent Brown’s treatment of Luke. Brown

3. See the commentary website: <http://www.byunewtestamentcommentary.com/welcome/>.

is a Mormon neo-pioneer, trained as a New Testament scholar with a PhD from Brown University, followed by a respected career at BYU. His commentary's organization makes his work approachable. His prose is lucid, lean, and readable—not virtues one takes for granted among sophisticated scholars. The author's arguments are readily followed. His volume will prove user-friendly to a general audience and offers fresh angles of vision and multiple insights. Experts will provide the full review and credit that Brown's work warrants. In what follows I will merely call upon it incidentally to illustrate debatable issues that may prove relevant to the series as a whole.

It is possible that the forthcoming commentary presages a historic season when Mormon writers might contribute informed and distinctive perspectives to the wider world of biblical scholarship, as they have done in history, business, science, and other spheres. The commentary may also elevate the culture of Latter-day Saints who take prophetic utterance seriously, for “the past is a foreign country”; the New Testament does not interpret itself. Its construal profoundly, often unconsciously, colors how other scriptures and the messages of modern leaders are formed and heard. Do-it-yourself readings of scripture have a long tradition, especially in America's egalitarian culture where citizens treasure the right to understand and worship—or not—according to the dictates of their own conscience. But neither faith nor skepticism nor citizenship is well served by garbling the rights of conscience and democracy to mean that “my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge.”⁴ And the best scholarship is not, as it is commonly misunderstood to be, an exercise in esoteric minutiae. It has the capacity to illuminate the very nature of scripture and what can be known of the documents, events, and orientation of those who shaped the thought, faith, and practice of Christianity as it formed. The prospect of a competent, first-rate commentary that opens up the revolutionary, first-century Christian world and that utilizes and adds to the most persuasive, evidence-based scholarship, while respecting Mormon faith, is welcome, overdue, and potentially consequential.

4. Isaac Asimov, “A Cult of Ignorance,” *Newsweek*, January 21, 1980, p. 19.

How to accomplish this is less obvious. Faith and scholarship, mind and spirit, head and heart, revelation and reason, intellectuals and church leaders, freedom and loyalty—these pairings harbor natural tensions, like justice and mercy, both inside and outside of Mormonism. Their ends, essence, and methods are not identical. Yet while tension is not always comfortable, it need not imply irremediable conflict or contradiction. We attempt to minimize friction when lubricating our cars' engines but to employ it when steering and braking. Tension between opposing forces is what holds effective systems in place, as with the centripetal and centrifugal forces at play in an atom, our solar system, and our galaxy. How, then, shall we make inevitable tension our ally?

The task the commentators have set for themselves is formidable, the stakes for Mormon consciousness are high, the moment for making a constructive difference is opportune, and the volumes remain pliable (in that few of them are published and none yet is cast in hard copy). Given all this, what follows is an act of sympathetic reconnaissance. Were I to imagine myself a consultant to the steering committee of the incipient commentary, what crucial questions ought I pose to myself and to the committee to encourage the enterprise to succeed? We should welcome and address the hardest and most important questions we can conjure before the books take final form. If we don't get this right, the will and resources to try anew might not be gathered for a very long time. Advisors to the Willie and Martin handcart companies, like those to all faithful migrants about to launch an essential but dangerous journey by land or by sea, would be culpable if they did not probe as rigorously as possible in planning and execution.

It happens that this imagined consultant is a believing, practicing Latter-day Saint. As such, I gauge that our reconnaissance will be more secure if we seek the additional input of respected and respectful scholars who are not Latter-day Saints. We are poorly served if our thinking is too inbred or if we hear only what we want to be told by people who defer to us, think like us, and share our assumptions. Our very faith and hopes betray us if they numb us to relevant evidence and challenge.

Questions I would pose to myself

What is the primary purpose of the commentary?

People use the Bible variously. Primary emphases among Protestants include doctrinalism (urging intellectual assent to certain tenets); pietism (devotion, personal solace, or spirituality); moralism (the Bible as sourcebook for personal ethics); and culturalism (stimulus and guidance for cultural transformation or for interpreting culture).⁵ Additional inclinations include seeing the Bible as literature, as predictive prophecy, as inspired history, or as a collection of primary sources depicting the historical evolution of ancient peoples and the eventual formation, along with the influence of classic Greece and Rome, of Western society. Had we space, we could consider scripture's regulatory role, its hortatory or oracular functions, its use as a weapon against religious rivals or, in Judaic tradition, as the simpler basis for more sophisticated layers of commentary comprising the Talmud.

Shall the forthcoming BYU commentary incline in one or more of these directions? Or in other directions yet, such as arguing for the seamless links of the New Testament, except where mistranslated, to the conceptions, organization, and authority of the Book of Mormon and the modern church?

The aims of the series might be explained more thoroughly than in the preliminary volumes, especially concerning scholarly methods pursued and the intended audience. Are the volumes to be (1) historical-critical studies, (2) histories of how the scriptures have been received by others, or (3) theologically and devotionally centered? Each requires distinct rules of engagement well established in biblical and related scholarship. The first of these might preclude use of modern LDS scripture, for instance, while the latter two may not. If the commentary aspires to contribute in all these spheres, this entails challenges lest the work devolve into a

5. Richard Mouw, "The Bible in Twentieth-Century Protestantism: A Preliminary Taxonomy," in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 139–62.

methodological jumble. A change in the present format might facilitate prevention of that, as we will see below.

A more developed rationale for the volumes might prove helpful. Are the volumes intended to raise the profile of LDS biblical scholarship or to make a contribution in the field of biblical studies? If the latter, the books will need to hew to the same standards that scholars of other persuasions are held to and might be accomplished by Mormon scholars contributing to already established commentaries outside the Mormon world.

Does the series intend to increase the familiarity of church members with critical study of the New Testament? Many excellent introductions to the New Testament and to the Bible already exist. The express needs of a Mormon audience requiring their own commentary might helpfully spell out the commentary's intent, while keeping in mind problems noted in this essay associated with simply "harmonizing" ancient and modern revelations.

If the need is construed as more uniquely pastoral—for example, to help church members understand and address issues raised by biblical scholarship—such issues might better be laid out not by adopting a posture in loco parentis but by conveying the information readers need to weigh the options.

Can we assemble the right team of scholars for the large task of combining "the best of ancient linguistic and historical scholarship with Latter-day Saint doctrinal perspectives"?

The ultimate answer to this query will be the quality of the finished products. Yet the question, while sensitive, is essential to pose while the project remains malleable. Before responding, I should disclose that I know and admire a number of the contributors to the series who are already on board: capable people in multiple domains who have taught me significant things. More than one is intellectually exceptional. Other reviewers, more distant from the authors, should and inevitably will add their assessments in the future.

The series website points out that the scholars designated to produce the commentary have backgrounds, collectively, in “early Christian history, prophetic and apocalyptic literature, Greek and Latin languages and literatures, Roman religion and history, Jewish religion and history, including the Dead Sea Scrolls, and ancient law.”⁶ This impressive array of the scholars’ fields of expertise is sure to strengthen the commentary.

The website, however, does not list a board of reviewers to critique the volumes before publication. Perhaps review is presently accomplished ad hoc by individual authors or pursued internally by the steering committee or by some other means. Yet despite their various strengths, scarcely any of the steering committee members and the scholars so far identified are trained at the doctoral level as New Testament specialists. With few exceptions, the writings each author lists on the commentary’s website do not appear in peer-reviewed journals and presses esteemed in the field of New Testament studies. Instead, the listed scholarship is published predominantly in popular, devotional, or scholarly venues ultimately owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The site’s separate and more general bibliography (labeled both as “full” and “selected”) lists well over 500 items, but virtually all are published in similar venues, including devotional pieces by church members and leaders. This by no means precludes the scholarship in any given case from being accurate and valuable. But paucity of publications in external journals and presses does put the enterprise at risk of being or seeming intellectually and theologically too cozy, too remote from the give-and-take rigors encouraged by peer review and participation in the wider conversation among recognized specialists.

The question, then, is whether the participating scholars and steering committee already involved in the BYU commentary should consider pooling their talents and efforts with those of additional people who contribute to the wider professional field. Some of the external reviewers, at least, might well include scholars outside of LDS circles. Even if additional contributors were limited to scholars with LDS affiliation, perhaps the commentators would enjoy broader vision if more were

6. <http://www.byunewtestamentcommentary.com>.

solicited from outside BYU to complement the considerable resources there. Laudably, the commentary's officials informally indicate that other interested scholars are welcome to inquire about getting involved.

A related question presents itself: Among the participating scholars who demonstrably *are* trained in New Testament studies at a professional level, to what degree will they engage the up-to-date work of the most influential authorities? The bibliography of the electronic version of the commentary on Luke by the very capable Kent Brown, for instance, lists more than fifteen books and commentaries on Luke (all in English). These are cited hundreds of times in the course of Brown's commentary, demonstrating a welcome and ample involvement with reputable scholars. What is lacking is any mention, even in disagreement, of some of the most important contemporary scholarship on Luke, including what is broadly considered the preeminent current authority: François Bovon's three-volume *Hermeneia* commentary (2002–12), along with Bovon's indispensable 600-page review of Lukan scholarship during the past half century. Might Professor Brown consider using Bovon as a central interlocutor in a hard-copy version of his commentary?

Have we got the right name for the series?

The impulse to adopt BYU's name in the commentary's working title is understandable. Most of the participating authors for scheduled volumes are or have been employed at BYU, and the university has supported their work on the volumes. To what extent, however, will using the university's name in the series suggest to readers its imprimatur, despite the disclaimer on the title page? A number of faculty at BYU with training in biblical studies are not part of the project for various reasons, and the public may wrongly infer their endorsement from the title. Similarly, one wonders if this title intends to signal the approval and sponsorship of its publisher, BYU Studies, in a sense analogous to Oxford University Press issuing the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*. There is a difference between the endorsement implied by a series called

BYU New Testament Commentary and one labeled BYU *Studies* New Testament Commentary.

What will the project's philosophy of interpretation be?

Joseph Smith Jr.'s statement in an 1842 letter is now taken as scripture among Latter-day Saints: "We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly" (Article of Faith 8). This embrace of biblical as well as of modern revelation has been reflected in Mormon tradition ever since. But what does Smith's statement actually mean when his followers engage scripture?

The faith's founding prophet spoke often of things that had been taken from or added to the original texts that would come to form the Bible. Hence, in his understanding, the texts were corrupted not merely by periodic errors of translation, but also by imperfect *transmission*. Our required hermeneutic in construing Smith's words, as well as in construing the scriptures themselves, is at once rendered more complex than first appears.

Other questions quickly accrue. Did Joseph Smith mean to suggest that the correctly transmitted and translated portions of the Bible represent the very *words* of God, so that we properly lift each word or verse or passage to assemble correct doctrine? Or did he mean something else—perhaps that the canonized collection as a whole conveys the *word* of God: God's message, intent, thrust?

In an effort to honor God's word, is one required to embrace the accuracy of biblical explanations of various place-names that linguistic experts find to be folk etymologies? Can we be sure that God was the power that prompted two bears to emerge from the woods to tear up forty-two young people who had mocked Elisha's bald head (2 Kings 2:23–25)? Or that God slew Uzzah on the spot for trying to steady the sacred ark that he found precariously shaking on oxen's backs in transport (2 Samuel 6:6–7)? Or that God's will and words are well conveyed in many Proverbs that seem vengeful and self-concerned? That the author of 1 John 2:18 was correct in proclaiming the world's end times to be upon his contemporaries? These are small and simple quandaries,

but they are of the sort that require an explicit hermeneutic in our prospective commentary.

On what version of the Bible should the commentary be based?

The theological and cultural contexts of modern Mormonism and of BYU condition the project's paradigm on this basic front as well as others. For example, the project's steering committee, in the interest of accuracy and clarity, might have chosen to produce a fresh translation, in twenty-first-century prose, based on the current critical edition of the Greek manuscripts, leaving the venerable and antique King James Version to history or to devotional settings. Understandably and presumably, the committee felt obligated to use the KJV because of the church's commitment to this version, which has deepened in the past half century. Despite other attempts at explanation over the years, the core of this commitment is perhaps the style of the Book of Mormon's narrative.⁷ This style resulted from Joseph Smith's then-appropriate nineteenth-century approximation of seventeenth-century Jacobean English while translating the thought of first-millennium Hebrews (BC and AD) who had adopted an evolved version of ancient Egyptian script. Successor prophets have been reluctant to recast into contemporary English Smith's original translation of the gold plates, and loath as well to strain the tether between this Shakespearean-era prose and the church's current English Bible of choice. Many of Smith's concepts in the minds of his followers attach deeply to King James phrasings with which he was working (for example, "dispensation of the fulness of times," as though this is a defined and consummating epoch among other divinely foreseen epochs rather than "when the times reach their fulfillment"; Ephesians 1:10 NIV). Hence the modern church's retention of the KJV.

Conversely, the BYU commentators might have spared themselves the enormous labor of a fresh translation of the Greek, retaining only

7. The evolution of the King James Version from the common but by no means exclusive version in early Mormonism to the official version of recent decades is treated in chapter 5 and on pages xlv–xlvii in the updated edition of Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

the official LDS English Bible as the text on which they comment. This would have constrained the credibility of the commentary as a serious contemporary product in the eyes of the wider guild of New Testament scholars, making the commentary seem a somewhat parochial, sectarian affair rather than a rigorous contribution to contemporary biblical scholarship with an LDS inflection.

Addressing this implicit dilemma, the BYU scholars opted to include both the KJV *and* a fresh translation, a promising solution offering a bridge between LDS tradition and modern scholarship. Even granted this decision, however, the force of tradition or of perceived ecclesiastical sway may color the result. Kent Brown includes the expected new translation of Luke's Greek (accomplished by Eric Huntsman and based on the 2012 critical edition of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*) but then submerges it to secondary status: "This commentary rests on the language of the King James Translation of the Bible. This text is the standard for English-speaking members of the Latter-day Saint faith. All discussions begin with this translation." The new translation was prepared "to illustrate how a Greek text can be understood a little differently and how it can be rendered into modern English. . . . The elegance of the latter translation does not rise to the level of the KJV—no English translation does—but it serves as a guide to readers when passages seem difficult to grasp."

This substantively understates the significance of four centuries of advances in establishing a Greek text more nearly approximating what was originally written. This approach also implies that elegance trumps accuracy as a criterion for the Bible we should study, an argument that many earlier Latter-day Saints disdained for fear of gilding the lily of "the simple language of the fishermen of Galilee." (Luke, we should note, was likely not a fisherman, and he wrote good Greek. Mark's Greek, by contrast, is primitive, and modern ears hear distortion to the extent that they take it as elegant when cast in the King James style.) As a whole, the submersion of the new translation leaves us to wonder which would be better: to have a commentary on the Greek text of Luke as best reconstructed in the current critical edition or, instead, a commentary on a

400-year-old English translation of Luke based on Greek texts that are much further removed from the originals than those that comprise the critical edition.

A related example of the distinctive religious currents to be navigated is embedded in the terminology the commentary employs. The series offers us not a new “translation,” but a fresh “rendition.” This label intends to signal a loose English paraphrasing of the original language in passages where it encourages understanding by modern readers. Participating scholars also “render” rather than “translate” to preempt any impression that their work presents itself as an “inspired translation” after the order of Joseph Smith. Moreover, “rendition” permits adoption of phrases and nuances favored by the Prophet but not necessarily extant in the Greek.⁸ In some respects, then, the new volumes may be less strictly a commentary on the New Testament than a commentary on the Mormon emendation of the New Testament.

The character of the rendition produced by these uniquely Mormon confluences will prove subtle in many instances, striking in others. How potentially striking is suggested by the work of one scholar originally associated with the series. John Hall’s provisional translation of John 1:1, which, he argues, the Greek allows, reflects Smith’s cosmology, which is at variance with that of historic Christianity. Hall recasts the usual translation (something close to “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”) as: “In the ruling council was a spokesman, and the spokesman was among the gods and the spokesman was himself a God.”⁹ This contrasts not only with most renditions, but also with Smith’s own translation (or experimental/inspired reworking) of the passage, which reads: “In the beginning was the gospel preached

8. John W. Welch provided the explanation for the choice of “rendition”; correspondence with author, September 22, 2014.

9. John Hall, lecture on the new LDS/BYU translation, February 26, 2006; recorded in notes by Bonoboi, “The LDS New Translation of the New Testament,” *One Dude’s Mormon Studies* (blog), March 6, 2006, <http://onedudesms.wordpress.com/2006/03/06/the-lds-new-translation-of-the-new-testament/>, May 14, 2012. Translation previously confirmed by author’s correspondence, July 16, 2010, with Professor John Hall, who is no longer associated with the commentary project.

through the Son. And the gospel was the word, and the word was with the Son, and the Son was with God, and the Son was of God.” Given Dr. Hall’s radical departure from translation precedent, on the one hand, and Kent Brown’s marginalizing of the new translation in favor of the KJV on the other, it will be interesting to study in what patterned ways future volumes will link with or depart from widely accepted translations of the Greek, as well as Smith’s alterations and augmentations of the King James Bible.

Whether scholars cast their new translation in ways that reflect Mormon theology such as John Hall did, or instead incorporate alterations from Joseph Smith’s translation or other modern LDS scriptures, their inclinations, and their readers’ inclinations, may be prompted by the understanding that, because the Prophet’s labors enacted a “restoration” in diverse ways, his work with the Bible is consistently a recovery of the way the text read in its original form. And indeed, Smith’s language often leads us in that direction, prompting recent generations of Saints to surmise that the Joseph Smith Translation consistently outranks the critically received Greek text in approximating what was originally written.

This is problematic territory, however, and presents anomalies if one is to be faithful to evidence and modern methods concerning the historical New Testament—evidence expanded and methods revolutionized since Mormonism’s founding. Moreover, to think solely in this conventional way constricts apprehension of the scope and character of Smith’s restoration. His enactment of the restoration concept was not so simple as “recovery of that which once historically existed,” just as his relation with the Bible is vastly more complex than his statement that the Bible is God’s word insofar as it is correctly translated. If we think only in this way, confident that first-century Christians thought much like twenty-first-century Latter-day Saints, it is understandable that the new commentary on Luke would find a Mormon-like emphasis on the nuclear family in Luke’s awareness and in Jesus’s words that other scholars would not find. “For example,” writes Brown, “the Latter-day Saint emphasis on families brings a new approach both to Jesus’ purpose in providing the miraculous draught of fish that the soon-to-be-called

disciples lift out of the waters of the Sea of Galilee (see Luke 5:1–11), and to Jesus’ sayings about his struggle against ‘the chief of the devils,’ Beelzebub (see Luke 11:14–26).”

Now it might be instructive to inquire into what Luke has to say about families; that would entail historical-critical methods, and the results may or may not overlap with contemporary LDS emphases. It might also be interesting to examine how LDS discussions of the family have called on Luke; that would incline toward a reception history of Luke. It could further be worthwhile to analyze other theological uses to which Latter-day Saints put Luke’s gospel. Any such approaches could be accomplished with rigor and yield insight. But we introduce methodological problems when we apply material that belongs in a reception history, a theological study, or a homily to marshal claims about what the historical author of Luke intended or the historical Jesus did. From an academic vantage, our access to what Luke meant or Luke’s Jesus did derives from historical-critical study.

It would help, I think, to appreciate the rich multivalence of Joseph Smith’s restoration beyond “the recovery of corrupted historical truths and authority.” Additional dimensions of his restoration include “repairing that which is fractured,” “completing that which is partial,” fusing familiar elements with others both “new” yet “everlasting,” bringing forth things not formerly existing in history, but “kept hidden from the foundations of the earth.” His translation of the Bible included the recovery of strands of original texts, he said, but he also harmonized contradictions, fixed grammar, offered (what he taught was inspired) commentary, experimented with phrasings, and added long and provocative sections without biblical parallel. All this may have included the (inspired) impulse not simply to recover the biblical text as it once was, but more broadly to recast the Bible *as it ought to have been*, so as to comport with the revelations given him. This may even be suggested in a revelation directed to Sidney Rigdon in December 1830, when Smith was engaged almost daily in translating the Bible: “And a commandment I give unto thee—that thou shalt write for him; and the scriptures shall be given, *even as they are in mine own bosom*, to

the salvation of mine own elect” (Doctrine and Covenants 35:20).¹⁰ This thrust differs from generic *targumic* tradition in Judaism and Christianity to the extent that Smith proceeded by revelation.

This is startling only in relation to our assumptions. It need be no more unsettling than coming to terms with evidence that Smith did not translate the gold plates primarily by looking at the tangible plates themselves. Or that today’s hundreds of Native American tribes are not primarily descendants of Hebrews as Smith and his generation believed. Or that, as the church’s recent online statement rightly notes, we do not know exactly what relationship the Book of Abraham bears to history and historical documents, though church members have faith in the scripture’s inspired source and nature.¹¹

All this raises for the New Testament commentary a fundamental question of structure. On the one hand, we can scarcely produce a faithful Mormon-inflected commentary while ignoring relevant modern Mormon revelation. On the other hand, interspersing such revelation

10. See Philip Barlow, “To Mend a Fractured Reality: Joseph Smith’s Project,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38/3 (2012): 28–50.

11. <https://www.lds.org/topics/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham?lang=eng>: “Evidence of ancient origins, substantial though it may be, cannot prove the truthfulness of the book of Abraham any more than archaeological evidence can prove the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt or the Resurrection of the Son of God. The book of Abraham’s status as scripture ultimately rests on faith in the saving truths found within the book itself as witnessed by the Holy Ghost. . . . Moreover, documents initially composed for one context can be repackaged for another context or purpose. Illustrations once connected with Abraham could have either drifted or been dislodged from their original context and reinterpreted hundreds of years later in terms of burial practices in a later period of Egyptian history. The opposite could also be true: illustrations with no clear connection to Abraham anciently could, by revelation, shed light on the life and teachings of this prophetic figure. . . . [Among possible explanations of the Book of Abraham is that] Joseph’s study of the papyri may have led to a revelation about key events and teachings in the life of Abraham, much as he had earlier received a revelation about the life of Moses while studying the Bible. This view assumes a broader definition of the words *translator* and *translation*. According to this view, Joseph’s translation was not a literal rendering of the papyri as a conventional translation would be. Rather, the physical artifacts provided an occasion for meditation, reflection, and revelation. They catalyzed a process whereby God gave to Joseph Smith a revelation about the life of Abraham, even if that revelation did not directly correlate to the characters on the papyri.”

promiscuously with the historically received New Testament, in the context of a commentary informed by the flood tide of persuasive modern scholarship, is a shotgun marriage of different kinds of insight. The offspring of such a marriage may not be an integrated Rembrandt-like portrait of Christ and emergent Christianity in the first century, but a clashing, inadvertent cubism à la Picasso. Intentional cubism, to be sure, has jarred many a viewer toward new perspectives. But is this the result our commentators seek?

A modest proposal

After the well-intentioned second-century Christian convert Tatian put together his *Diatessaron*, this synthesis, or “harmony,” of the four Gospels, the most prominent of its kind in early Christianity, became within a century the primary Gospel text in Syria. Not until the fifth century did church authorities there deem it wise to return to the four separate Gospels as they were handed down and given authoritative status elsewhere in Christendom. Attempting to homogenize the four Gospel accounts into a single narrative was a natural urge, but it prompted Tatian, sometimes arbitrarily, to choose one gospel’s account of an episode or a saying over others where they conflicted, to omit certain contradictory material in his sources, to conflate others, and to manufacture his own narrative sequence that differed from those of both John and the synoptic Gospels. The result was not a secure improvement in viewing the historical Jesus. It was more analogous to a modern person attempting to harmonize, perhaps by computer, four photographs of four different artists’ sculptures of the Madonna and presuming the resulting composite to be superior to any of them. Methinks I hear a turning in Michelangelo’s grave.

Sobered by that thought, might the forthcoming commentary adopt a format echoing the venerable *Interpreter’s Bible* and its “New”

iteration? This commentary's format divides each page into three parts:¹² the top consists of parallel columns of two translations of the Greek text; the middle is scholarly analysis and commentary explaining those texts; the bottom consists of devotional reflection and practical applications. Might the BYU commentary be similarly sectioned: the top with its two translations of each New Testament pericope; the middle consisting of exegesis, commentary, and context *as determined by scholarly tools available to any trained scholar*; the bottom treating amendments and augmentations from the Joseph Smith Translation, connections to additional Latter-day Saint scripture and applications by church leaders, and perhaps devotional material in that or a fourth section? This layout would (1) allow the historical New Testament its independent integrity; (2) embrace the best critical research, evidence, and thought interpreting and contextualizing it; and (3) without conflating the separable insights of modern revelation and that which is established through historical and literary tools, still respect the faith perspectives of Latter-day Saints as independent revelations, while putting them in conversation with the received historical New Testament and its informed interpreters.

What should be the relationship of scholarship and faith?

Among a hundred colorful quips of popular evangelist Billy Sunday from a century ago is this answer to our question: "When the word of God says one thing and scholarship says another, scholarship can go to hell!" As a believer, I might be more sympathetic to Sunday's fervor if we could be more certain than we can be that everything purporting to be God's word *is* God's word. Scholars and those who regard scholarship, however, including scholars of faith, are doomed to have to account also for the sort of verifiable evidence and argument available to everyone, including those outside their faith. If there be revelation from the divine,

12. Instances where too much commentary follows a given pericope preclude each page from beginning with a new scriptural passage.

it seems to come “through a glass, darkly,” conveyed to human beings in human contexts and filtered through human capacities “after the manner of their own languages” and thought.¹³ If there is a God behind the biblical portrayals of God, as we believers hold, we ought not forget what I call “Job’s friends’ syndrome”: one can displease the God of truth, as they did, by defending God on illicit grounds.

Shall all respectable scholarship be secular, then? “By no means!” as Paul was fond of saying.

A quarter of a century ago, the esteemed historian David Brion Davis reviewed the three-volume, 2,000-page, state-of-the-art *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience*. Though appreciating the landmark collection, he was vexed that believers among the one hundred contributors had, for fear of partisanship, so cloaked their private commitments that religion in the *Encyclopedia* seemed anesthetized and neutered. The disjunction between erudition and the phenomenon it so coolly assessed prompted Davis to contemplate the volumes’ most likely readers. The image that occurred to him was of “countless numbers of married couples consulting one hundred celibate monks and nuns for their wisdom on the American sexual experience.”¹⁴ I agree with the author of Job that we can err in attempting to defend God by being insufficiently informed, religiously presumptuous, or wrongly motivated. I agree also with David Brion Davis that there is no need for religionists (or secularists for that matter) to keep their authentic selves antiseptically separated from their writing. What *is* required of all camps who respect evidence and thoughtfulness and who write and read under the banner of authentic scholarship, however, is that the evidence and best thinking available to all must be accounted for. There is nothing intellectually inferior about possessing faith, but scholars qua scholars cannot responsibly fail to account for available evidence simply by asserting their faith (whether that faith be Mormon, Muslim, Catholic, Baptist, or Humanist).

13. We can see this at work, for example, in the several first-person accounts of Joseph Smith’s first vision.

14. David Brion Davis, “Review Essay,” *Religion and American Culture* 1 (Winter 1991): 119–27.

As with many religions in the twenty-first century, there is abroad in Mormondom a crisis of faith among a growing number, spread especially by the Internet and word of mouth. Among the seeds of this discontent is a sense of betrayal when people encounter aspects of the church's history that crack their perceptions and the faith that entwines with them: "Why was I never taught this? What else has been kept from me?" In recent years, the church has responded variously, increasingly recognizing the importance of a probing history and a membership that has access to it, as evidenced by the broadened and elevated caliber of well-educated historians it has hired in its historical department, incipient changes coming in its curricula and manuals for classes, candid and competent publications it has sponsored on once-forbidden topics, and more informed and candid statements it now posts on its websites on controversial questions of history and theology. This represents an admirable and necessary step forward, enabling the faith of its interested constituents to be more deeply rooted and organically flexible, rather than brittle and easily withered under each new challenge that may arise in the twenty-first century.

Before damage to faith broadens exponentially, the times may be nigh when a parallel competence, candor, and thoughtfulness will need to thrive among Latter-day Saints in understanding the Bible. The coming commentary on the New Testament could provide a scaffolding. Done well, such a work would allow for both spiritual and scholarly spheres, not just their outward forms. Done exceedingly well, the volumes may militate against scholarship becoming inert and faith naïve.

A generation ago, Truman Madsen invited a cluster of prominent religious scholars to Provo to reflect on Mormonism and Judeo-Christian parallels. Among them was the great New Testament scholar and dean of the Harvard Divinity School, Krister Stendahl, who spoke on the Sermon on the Mount and 3 Nephi. I encountered him shortly after his return to Cambridge and asked him about his experience. He stared at the ground for a long ten seconds, then replied softly, "I haven't processed it fully. It was as potent as being among the Jews in Jerusalem." Stendahl was a friend to the Mormons, receiving international press in defending

them when later he became the presiding Lutheran authority in Sweden. His concluding words at the Provo conference are worth considering as Mormons contemplate Davis's scholars and Job's friends, Athens and Jerusalem:

As I look at the whole spectrum of God's menagerie of humankind and its history, including its religious history, I think it is important to reflect on the limits as well as the glories of the hunger for and joy in additional information. . . . [As] I studied the Sermon on the Mount, . . . Luke reads, "Blessed are you that hunger" (Luke 6:21). Matthew reads, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*" (Matthew 5:6). In the Book of Mormon the saying has moved away from both the hunger of the stomach and the thirst for justice to the religious realm of the Spirit (3 Nephi 12:6). And there is nothing wrong in that; it is our common Christian tradition and experience to widen and deepen the meaning of holy words. But let us never forget that quotation from Micah which reads, "For what else does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly before your God" (Micah 6:8). For there is sometimes too much glitter in the Christmas tree.¹⁵

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15. Krister Stendahl, "The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi," in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 153–54.