On the Moral Risks of Reading Scripture

George Handley

Reading scripture in various religious cultures of the Book involves risk. If reading is posited as an encounter between the limited human understanding and the unlimited knowledge of God, faithful reading typically requires some kind of deference for the pure and transcendent meaning that the text purports to contain and healthy suspicion toward the impurities of human perception that might occlude such meaning. These impurities include our historicity (our embeddedness in time and space) and our partiality (our individual habits and proclivities of judgment that select and omit idiosyncratically in order to generate our interpretations of experience and texts alike). There is a rich history of the theology of reading within various religious traditions that has sought to understand the dynamics of this human contact with the divine word. It is not my purpose here to rehearse this history but to initiate a conversation, to essay a description of the inherent moral risks of reading implicit in a theology of restoration and continuing revelation. I do so in the hope of avoiding some of the common pitfalls of poor and superficial treatment of the question of what it means to read sacred literature. These pitfalls, I insist, are found on both sides of the polarized divide today between the ever-popular secular theories of culture and the often entrenched and defensive positions within religious cultures we find today.

Because the idea of a sacred text inevitably spinning off into infinite meanings, as many literary theories seem to suggest, is a problematic conclusion for believers, it is tempting to insist that a preestablished state of belief is enough to somehow transcend or avoid human dilutions or refractions of the truth. It is perhaps for this reason that believers often spend more religious energy attempting to help others work up the requisite state of belief than thinking about the potential for misunderstanding within a state of belief. Certainly one of the dangers of a believing reader is the confidence that what one understands is necessarily divine truth merely because of belief, as if belief alone guarantees the unadulterated truth, untouched by the stains of human perception. While such attitudes are not often fully articulated or defended, unfortunately they are often implicitly involved in the formation of belief. And while they are intended to respect the integrity of the sacred text, to the extent that they imagine the exchange between divine will and human understanding as static, they do not seek to account for remainders or gaps in reading. We enter an almost tautological cycle in which, because belief is required for understanding, understanding is identified as an understanding of truth only to the degree that it confirms that prior belief. Right reading here consists of the right belief emerging before the reading has even begun to take place; this risks implying, in other words, that reading is unnecessary since it produces nothing new. In this way, reading is imagined in such a way as to avoid the moral risk of judgment. Even a brief consideration of the political and sectarian dogmatism within many religious cultures today—and the concomitant neglect of the rich complexity of their own sacred texts—provides enough evidence that such reading theologies are alive and well.

The notion that belief precedes understanding stands opposed to the commonplace secular view of literature that has predominated in secular culture at least since Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God. In this view, judgment tends to take precedence over belief, and certainly over any notion of inspiration or revelation. According to Giles Gunn, in modern secular reading practices "one reinterprets for the sake of believing once again in the possibility of understanding and thereby rediscovers what it is like to believe."¹ Such attitudes respect the autonomy of the reader and her capacity to produce new understandings, while bypassing the problem posed by the possibility of divine intervention and communication of meaning. The implication, in other words, is that reading produces perpetually diversified meanings or "truths" that are merely idiosyncratic for each reader but never transcendent. Curiously here again, the reader evades moral risk since what is sought is merely an interpretation that holds a certain kind of creative integrity, persuasiveness, or style. Not surprisingly, we have
seen over the course of the past century an increasing distance between these two positions, placing secular and sacred literature at greater and greater distance from one another because of the fundamental and mistaken assumption that they require irreconcilable reading strategies.

I wish to suggest that as a modern-day book of divine origin and translation, the Book of Mormon collapses this binary opposition between sacred and secular reading practices. It is a book of scripture that offers transcendent understanding in response to individual belief, but because the understanding that it offers reminds us constantly of the inevitability of remainders, it also offers grounds for belief in ultimacy. In its perpetual metatextual reminders about the inherent textuality of understanding, as well as the need for abridgment, revision, rephrasing, appropriation, and the seeming inevitability of anachronism (things that Nephi’s use of Isaiah and other biblical language demonstrates particularly well), the Book of Mormon highlights the dynamic and incomplete nature of interpretation. In this sense, it raises the moral stakes—both the costs and the benefits—of reading, forcefully foregrounding both the need to bring ourselves fully to the text, rather than emptying ourselves of all prejudice and partiality, and the need to revise and to rethink what we thought we believed. The Book of Mormon demonstrates the paradox that no transcendent meaning can be gleaned from it without at least some individual wager of belief as to what it might mean. Indeed, all transcendent meaning appears to be dependent upon the bets of the contingent reader. It thus raises the moral stakes of reading to insist simultaneously on the divine and omniscient ultimacy that lies behind words to which we are answerable as well as on the need for creative, idiosyncratic readings that stem from the particulars and impurities of our historical and partial conditions as individual human readers. As the emblem of a theology of continual revelation, the Book of Mormon also sheds important light on the not-so-different processes of interpreting sacred and secular texts. In what follows, I wish to explore the theological implications of this process before then turning to a passage in 2 Nephi where we can identify these tensions.

Towards Mutuality
Matthew Arnold could never have argued for the inherent value of great works of literature in an environment that did not see texts themselves as primarily determinant of meaning. The very humanism he inherited from at least the Renaissance suggested that great books shape and mold great minds, great citizens, moral people. But in the West’s disillusion with this “you-are-what-you-read” formula, we began to assume a Nietzschean responsibility to be more accountable for the worlds of our own making: it was not so much the text as the proactive creativity of the reader that could or should make meaning. In contemporary criticism, we are beginning to see a turn away from the polarizations implied in these two positions, coupled with a yearning for some way to reconcile these two (valid) views—a yearning that provides an opening for rethinking the nature of sacred literature.

Certainly, without attention to the ways that culture and worldviews shift through time, we become blind to the ways we want to read particular meanings into texts, and it is not difficult to see the danger in that. But without due attention to the text itself, we render all literature and all readings of equal value, something with which any believer in an authoritative text will inevitably feel uncomfortable. When this kind of radical flattening of the horizon of literary distinction occurs—between greater and lesser works of literature, between a poem, an essay, and a newspaper article, as we see in some forms of New Historicism or Reader Response Theory, for example—it also becomes virtually impossible to argue for the importance of the distinction between sacred and secular literature. And as I have suggested, one method believing readers have used to protect the text’s authority is to assert that scripture itself assumes priority as determinant of its meaning and truthfulness, such that the truth of the word of God would seem to be self-contained and in no need of any reader’s agency, historicity, or prejudice. If this attitude becomes excessive in its defensiveness, however, it begins to be intolerant of the ways in which the contingency of the human reader can become entangled or commingled with the will and mind of God. Human
agency is assumed to contaminate and divert, perhaps even to pervert, the ways of God in the minds of men. And indeed, Peter, who warns that scripture is by definition not “of any private interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20), also warns against the self-destruction of such misinterpretation. Speaking of Paul’s epistles in 2 Peter 3, he notes:

“As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.” (2 Peter 3:16–18)

Or as Alma simply says in the Book of Mormon, “Behold, the scriptures are before you; if ye will wrest them it shall be to your own destruction” (Alma 13:20).

These are strong warnings. But, as my reading of 2 Nephi will show, they do not need to imply that we cannot bring our personality and invest it in the reading experience. If the refreshing and renewing power of new readers is disallowed, we may find ourselves leaning too heavily on the crutches of tradition and habit (and not, ironically, on the text), making ourselves vulnerable to assuming that language perpetually generates the same meanings across all times and places. We would, in other words, have to concede that human agency, imagination, and experience play no role whatsoever in the generation of divine meaning. While this would protect and keep unambiguously clear the boundaries between the human and the divine, such reliance on tradition actually bypasses rather than protects the special truthfulness of God’s word. In order to preserve the notion of the text’s special status above and beyond human stains, this approach holds to the promise of an absolute and transcendently correct reading, a mastery of the text. As Alan Jacobs argues, this position of mastery easily slides into a categorical suspicion of and freedom from the text and thus is not invested in the moral risks of reading. Though “freedom from’ and ‘mastery of’ are related but not identical concepts,” he points out, each entails “the elimination . . . of an ongoing dialogical encounter with the text, in which the reader and the text subject each other to scrutiny. . . . In neither case is there anything like real reverence, love, or friendship—in Bakhtin’s term, faithfulness is lacking—and thus, in neither case is the readerly/critical experience productive of genuine knowledge (of the self or the other).”

There is an essential moral weakness in the tendency to avoid confronting the human stains within sacred literature, just as there is in a hermeneutics of suspicion that distrusts its revelatory claims. In both cases, the reader is never required to take what Jacobs calls the “enormous risks” of using discernment. In the former case, to assume a radical textual determinism is to assume that it is merely and always the text that produces meaning, never the reader. The inherent risk of engaging one’s agency, choices, and judgment as a reader is bypassed in the interest of a meaning that is simply given, though how and why it is given or not given are rarely explained or are poorly theorized. Acts of interpretation in such a model are ultimately self-delusions, since the agency involved in discernment is ignored: a reader strictly intolerant of the ambiguities of human perceptions of divine will cannot explain how she avoids worshipping a god after her own image. In the case of a hermeneutics of suspicion, on the other hand, the determinism tends to lie with the reader who produces all meaning, the text being radically excluded from the process of meaning-making. The inherent risk of being answerable to an authority or a source of knowledge outside oneself is bypassed in the interest of a meaning that is simply chosen. Acts of interpretation in such a model are ultimately solipsistic illusions because the agency of discernment is the only agency at work: a reader strictly intolerant of the possibility of divine intervention and communication cannot explain how she avoids the false consciousness she originally sets out to escape.
There is, however, another possibility, one that seeks what the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr calls “mutuality.” Great knowledge comes at great risk—what Paul Ricoeur calls the very “wager” at the heart of all interpretation—and one of the risks of reading scripture is to bet on one’s interpretive capacity to discern the will of God. To have faith is to believe in the possibility that a mingling of human and divine understanding does not have to lead to deception even if it also means abdicating the need for absolute certainty. Faith maintains a margin of freedom from the text even as it seeks communion and understanding. Jacobs compares this mutuality to the dialogic imagination of Bakhtin, a kind of hope in a fruitful give-and-take between the reader and the text. He explains: “This hope involves neither demand nor expectation; indeed, if it demanded or expected it would not be hope.” Thus while “absolute suspicion—one that always and on principle refuses Ricoeur’s wager—is the natural outworking of despair,” its apparent opposite of “triumphalist confidence” (the “presumption” that one has apprehended truth that is always transcendentally and eternally unchangeable) is also a form of “hopelessness.”

I would suggest that the mutuality towards which Jacobs gestures can be heard in the Lord’s chastisement in the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants. While the Lord criticizes those who “seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness” because every one of them “walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol” (D&C 1:16), we learn that it is precisely our human tendency to imagine gods and worlds of our own making that the Lord requires in order to reveal his will to us through his prophets, so that we might be corrected and gain wisdom. God’s dilemma thus is that he must speak to his servants “in their weakness, after the manner of their language” (1:24). This mutuality of God’s language and human language, between God’s omniscience and our limited imagination, makes up the very structure of continuing revelation.

So what are the moral risks of reading scripture in this model of mutuality? We risk self-deluding idol worship—worshipping the god of our imagination—on one hand, and we risk self-exposure to the piercing eye of God on the other. The point is that there is no escape from these risks. We must be willing also to admit we have been wrong—wrong about God and wrong about ourselves. We must risk, in other words, the possibility of error because that is the only way that we might learn precisely where, in fact, we have erred. We generally do not take such risks unless we are willing to wager that such knowledge will change us, heal us, draw us closer to godliness. There is, on the one hand, error that leads to destruction, as Peter remarks, but there is, on the other, what the atonement makes of the errors we bring to the Lord: He turns the weaknesses and conditions of our human existence into the necessary stepping stones to and the strengths of our sanctification.

By asking us consistently to liken its pages to ourselves, as well as by consistently demonstrating through allegorical representation the risks and rewards of our interpretations, the Book of Mormon opens itself up perpetually to the contemporary moment of its reader. It makes actual its claims each and every time it is read. In this sense, for all its divinity, the Book of Mormon is also literally always secular—a word that indicates, among other things, that something is “in human time.” The book, in other words, embodies the paradox that God spoke and continues to speak “in human time,” that prophets wrote and continue to write in human language, and that our reading practices cannot eschew—either through triumphalist confidence in received tradition or through secular despair in the face of the sacred—the inherent answerability and mutuality of the act of reading.

Symbolism and the Sacred
To this point in this paper, I have been speaking at a relatively abstract or theoretical level. Is there anything in scriptural texts themselves that justifies what I have outlined above regarding the nature of reading scripture? In the remainder of this essay, I would like to argue that there are, perhaps particularly in the Book of Mormon, consistent indications that reading scripture must take the kind of mutuality I have described as its aim. My
argument, though, will not be that scripture makes an explicit claim about reading at the level of content, but rather that its very manner of inscription and internal organization implicitly gesture in the direction of a reading process of mutuality.

If we are to push the implications of the Doctrine and Covenants passage cited above, all forms of revelation in sacred literature are translations between divinity and humanity, and it is therefore no accident that we find in books that make special claims about points of contact between the human and the divine such a high level of figurative language, indirection, and self-referential metatextuality. Instead of signifying their fictionality, however, these symbols exhibit an inherent respect for and anticipation of the human reception of divine revelation that is built into the very structure of sacred texts. Thus, despite their didactic style and often declarative and imperative tense, scriptures also exhibit what Ricoeur calls their own “interpretive dynamism”: “the text interprets before having been interpreted.”

This is an important feature of sacred texts that is often ignored by believing and nonbelieving readers alike. Figurative language implicitly, if not explicitly, acknowledges the text’s own partiality and its dependence on readers for the text to expand and magnify its meaning and thereby to work out its potential universality. Ricoeur points both to the sacred text’s capacity to imagine its own poetic force and to the consequent need for a semiotic approach (as opposed to a “historical-critical method”). Understanding the truths of revelation is not so much a matter of contextual scholarship or even specialized exegesis, but a measured response to the guidance of the text’s internally organized symbolism. Revelation, for Ricoeur, is thus the moment of transfer from the seemingly ahistorical space of a sacred meaning into our own history, something akin to what Nephi describes when he asks us to “ liken” the scriptures to us. Readerly imagination displaces or relocates the text’s meaning in the reader’s capacity to imagine the figural nature of the text. Ricoeur explains: “A meaning potential in the language—that is, in the things already said—is liberated through the entangled twofold process of metaphorizing the narrative and narrativizing the metaphor.”

What Ricoeur describes here is a kind of dialogue between a dynamic, receptive, and changeable reader and a dynamic, receptive, and changeable text. Belief in the possibility of the former—which is belief in the possibility of repentance and of the atonement itself—necessitates belief in the latter. Ricoeur insists, in other words, that if there is a readerly need to metaphorize the narrative of a sacred text, that need itself arises (as a response) from a semiotic pattern, already established within the text, that narrativizes metaphors. He takes as an example the parable of the sower, in which the “destiny of the sower is narrativized as the destiny of the word, [and] the destiny of the word is narrativized as the destiny of the sowing.” The sacred text, in other words, inserts “into the meaning of what is said something about its being said and its reception.”

If we were similarly to consider Lehi’s journey into the wilderness, we would say that the story appears to have metaphorical shape, that it can be read as a metaphor for the mortal journey to the promised land of heaven. Certainly this is not an uncommon reading of the narrative, as we hear countless attempts—in talks, lessons, and sermons—to identify the Liahonas in our lives, the Lamans and Lemuels, the trials of broken bows, etc. What is striking in the narrative, however, is how often this metaphorizing—and this is to Ricoeur’s point—is anticipated in the narrative itself. We see, for example, that the Book of Mormon is at pains to let us know that Lehi’s stories and dreams are all told to us only secondhand by his son Nephi (whose recounting is inevitably mediated by his learning in the language of his fathers) and only after having passed through the editorial hand of Mormon—and we, of course, can only read these heavily mediated narratives in the translation provided by Joseph Smith. The
book seems to insist rather emphatically on its textuality, making clear that reading, abridging, editing, and translating are integral components of being a seer who is also a translator.

But let us turn to a shorter, more specific text in order to illustrate this point more fully. Nephi’s frequent and extensive borrowing from the language of Isaiah exemplifies the prophetic editorial work I have just described. The text tells us that Nephi is a close reader of texts but that he sees in the language of prophecy and revelation an opportunity to add likening layers of meaning that allow for multiple contexts and contingent readings that are still faithful to the mind and will of God. This is one of the Book of Mormon’s most important and provocative ideas, and it implicitly suggests that faithful reading should be generous, aware but forgiving of human stains and weakness in the work of giving new life to the otherwise dead letter, just as God appears to be willing and able to use the same limited human language across a variety of contexts without compromising his truths. In fact, the implication seems to be that God’s transcendent and revealed meaning actually depends on multiple readings in order to reveal the fullness of his truth, which is to say that the truth depends on human imagination, one reader at a time. Seeing multiple applications for the same passages of scripture to radically distinct moments in human history, Nephi encourages us to do the same.

In perhaps one of the most important instances of Nephi’s approach to Isaiah, we see in 2 Nephi 27 a citation of verses from Isaiah 29 alluding to a sealed book that cannot be read. That the passage appears to be a prophecy of our time would seem to be the reason for its citation, but it comes to us as such only because it is, as presented in the text, already interpreted by Nephi. Nephi’s editorial work here is a reading we are asked to model, and it is a perfect example of what Ricoeur means by suggesting that we should metaphorize narrative (creatively read 2 Nephi 27), which is already a narrativized metaphor (2 Nephi 27 being already a creative reading of Isaiah 29). When we are told that this book contains the words of “those who have slumbered in the dust” and that they shall be delivered “unto another” (27:9), we are presented with a reference to the words of the dead that are, among other possibilities, an emblem of the book—the Book of Mormon—in our hands.

Of course we know that this is a prophecy of the Book of Mormon at least because of the Charles Anthon incident. It would be a narrow reading, however, to see it only as a prophecy of this particular incident and therefore only as a prophecy about the Book of Mormon. Admittedly, the language of the prophecy points us in this direction. Note, for example, just how much more detail is provided in Nephi’s version of Isaiah’s text than in the Bible, detail that seems clearly intended to secure the connection with the Anthon incident. But Nephi expands on the story enough to go through specification to a kind of generalization. For example, verse 6 establishes simply that the Lord will bring forth unto his addressee (“unto you”) the words of a book that will come from them who have slumbered. But Nephi appears to be addressing the remnant of the house of Israel as well as all people everywhere, especially those who have “closed [their] eyes” and rejected the prophets because of iniquity. So it is a historically specific people of the covenant he addresses (the remnant of the house of Israel), but also apparently any generic reader whatsoever. Thus, even as he adds details to Isaiah’s text in order to secure a connection between the prophecy of Isaiah and the Anthon incident, Nephi himself begins to allegorize that latter-day incident, providing the beginnings of its universalization.

Importantly, Nephi’s implicit allegorization of the Anthon incident is anticipated in the allegorizing language of Isaiah himself. Note that Isaiah speaks allegorically when he says: “The vision of all is become unto you as a book that is sealed.” And it is this as into which Nephi inserts his own creative appropriation of Isaiah 29. And Nephi’s explanations, the context of nineteenth-century experience, and our own contemporary perspective would seem to complete the allegory: the rejection of the authenticated translation by a learned man is an allegory of the wisdom of the world more generally and its rejection of revelation—a mistake we must not make. Going still
further, though, one can take as allegorical also the sacred book in 2 Nephi 27, understanding it as an emblem of a history—any history—that is lost to us until sufficient repentance has taken place. The reader, on this approach, is implied to be someone always awaiting the further opening of a sealed book. Indeed, because the Book of Mormon itself makes note of its own sealed and lost portions and makes claims about other records waiting to come forth until all revelations (i.e., Isaiah’s “vision of all” or Nephi’s “revelation from God, from the beginning of the world to the ending thereof”) are finally read, it (the Book of Mormon itself) can only serve as an intermediate step, a stepping stone, as it were, toward a greater understanding of God’s revelations. Even as it reveals, the book in Isaiah’s/Nephi’s prophecy keeps us aware of the still-slumbering dead, of ourselves as perhaps the still-slumbering reader, and of every sealed book still awaiting further translation.

Verses 10 and 11, moreover, seem to clarify the distinction between two kinds of sealed books and aid us in understanding this idea. One book is sealed because of pride, wickedness, wisdom of the world. This is the portion of the book described as given to “another;” but it is distinct from the sealed book that holds “all things from the foundation of the world unto the end thereof.” One way of understanding this might be to suggest that there is wickedness that prevents some from accepting the divinity of the Book of Mormon, and there is wickedness endemic to the human condition as such that prevents all of us—even those who accept the Book of Mormon—from being ready to “read by the power of Christ” to the point that “all things shall be revealed until the children of men, which ever have been among the children of men.” Can we assume that as long as history remains a mystery to us—as long as all we can produce is fragmented knowledge—it is a sign that we remain in this general state of insufficient grace to be able to read the meaning of all things? Certainly, we are here implicitly enjoined to retain hope and resist both the temptations of secular chauvinism and of the believer’s triumphalist confidence that Nephi chastises in later chapters when he complains of those who proclaim, “All is well—we have a Bible!”

Verse 12 adds an interesting twist to all this. The verse declares that when the book is delivered to “the man of whom I have spoken” (surely Joseph Smith), “the book shall be hid from the eyes of the world.” Such hiding was earlier spoken of in somewhat more allegorical terms (the slumbering, blind, and dreaming wicked who cannot understand God’s revelations), but here it seems both allegorical and literal: “the eyes of none shall behold it save it be that three witnesses shall behold it.” What seems especially rich about this figural and literal blindness, this figural and literal revelation, is that it posits the possibility that the very dichotomy between figural and literal is false. A refusal to read a sealed book, on the one hand, is here contrasted with the blessing of seeing the physical plates. The former position is based on faith in rationalism to the point that it refuses empirical evidence, the latter on faith in revelation to the point that it is rewarded with empirical evidence. The authentication of the translation, in other words, will not come from worldly wisdom but from, of all things, empirical experience, albeit facilitated and supplemented “by the power of God.” The Book of Mormon, although suggestive of God’s many mysteries, is not shrouded in mysticism. It is a book that promises revelation and delivers on its promise to those willing to make the wager. Unwillingness leads to our own condemnation—the only and very important caveat being that we should be careful not to overstate what we know, since the book in our hands is a metonym of the great book recording all things from the foundation of the world, a book that remains at least partially if not still substantially sealed.

Thus the sealed book in Isaiah becomes a prophecy about something much more fundamental and widely applicable than just an instantiation of the Book of Mormon’s historicity and truthfulness. It is a prophecy about prophecy, a revelation about revelation, and it reaches from the beginning to the end of time. The sealed book is an emblem of the very language and knowledge of God and of our relationship to the hope we may or may not have in God’s capacity to reveal all things to us. This would suggest that obtaining the power to revive the meaning of the words of the dead requires something from the reader: a purification of the heart, a point verse 12 makes most
emphatically. Such purification does not happen, though, without our wagering on the possibility that a sealed book can speak, nor without risking the possibility that what it speaks might reveal the fullness of our sins and wickedness. No one wants to open such a Pandora’s box without the hope that such knowledge will cleanse and purify: it only damns the one unwilling to believe it can be read or, as it were, unsealed. The sealed book in Isaiah and Nephi is therefore an emblem of hope in our potential, ultimately, to know all things, to obtain the mind of God. In this sense, it is also a warning of what we stand to lose when we assume the “learned” arrogance of a hermeneutics of suspicion, or when we assume the triumphalist confidence that we have all that we need, that we have already taken possession of the mind of God by virtue of having obtained a fundamental knowledge of his revelations.

Ricoeur insists that a “a theology that confronts the inevitability of the divine plan with the refractory nature of human actions and passions is a theology that engenders narrative.”\(^{19}\) Surely a theology like ours that produces texts and narratives in excess of the Bible is guilty as charged: it insists on this meeting ground between a divine plan and the unpredictable and potentially chaotic nature of multiple, individual interpretations. Consistent, then, with the fundamental meaning of a God in mortal flesh, it insists that the sacred is an encounter between the will of God and the will of men, the language of God and the language of men, heaven and earth, spirit and body. In so doing, our theology perpetually produces texts that, in their overt textuality, suggest their own nature as palimpsests and therefore point to the need for the poetic imagination of readers and for the unending need for more readers to come. What in other words keeps scripture alive and dynamic and from becoming flattened out by the exercises of tradition is the vivification of new interpretations, which is another way of saying that what makes the gospel true is its relevance to human narratives, seized upon by one reader at a time.

Rising to the challenge of reading revealed words seems, in a word, to begin with a paradoxical recognition of the fact of the Lord’s having withheld the fullness of revelation from us, of the fact that what we are reading in scripture is always partial, incomplete, and stained by human weakness. This opens up for the reader a choice: either I want to know all things, even if it means I must confess that I have erred and will continue to err in my quest to love God and gain His knowledge; or I do not want to know all things, even if it means that in my fear I err. It is a choice literally between life and death. We are broken, wayward humans, either way. But the hope in Christ is hope in a translation that miraculously places the will and mind of God in human flesh and posits the hope of such dead flesh finally conforming to the life-giving will and mind of God, a resurrection of the mind, as it were. To read scripture in faith is, in the end, to believe in the possibility that all of our broken readings might somehow be made whole once all the pages of the sealed book have finally been opened.

NOTES


2. Note, of course, that the standard approach to 2 Peter 1:20 is heavy-handed. Commentators generally agree that the passage has reference to the prophet’s interpretation of his or her revelatory experience, not to the reader’s interpretation of scripture.

3. Note that to be learned, in these texts, is not to have profound knowledge of language, history, or exegetical prowess but to repent and submit oneself to grace and belief in Christ, so that proper understanding can be

5. Ibid., 88.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 89, emphases in original.

9. Ibid.


11. Ibid., 159. Of course, there is no way to know for sure that one’s wager on the meaningfulness of scriptural symbols will always bear fruit, but without the risk of feeling after this meaningfulness there can never be any corroborating response to the metatextual clues of the text. If we reject the wager because of intolerance for this ambiguity, it means that we accept that all declarations will merely and always be grounded in misreadings and that all literary forms are merely and always secular.

12. The perhaps ironic implication is that a fundamentalist notion of a sacred and unchanging, once-revealed Word is counterproductive, barring human change.


14. Ibid., 158.

15. This is indicated in the footnote to Mormon 5:12 that is found in the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon.

16. This is surmised from his opening address in this chapter to the Jews and the Gentiles and to “those who shall be upon other lands, yea, even upon all lands of the earth” (27:1).

