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Abstract Review of “Poetic Language in Nineteenth Century Mormonism: A Study of Semiotic Phenomenology in Communication and Culture” (1990), by Michiko Takayama.

TAKAYAMA: RESTORATION REVELATION AS POETRY RATHER THAN FRAUD

James E. Faulconer

A respectful and appreciative treatment of Latter-day Saint beliefs is difficult for someone who is unable to accept them. How does a nonbeliever avoid the alternatives of either calling the text a fraud or claiming it as a translation of real documents when writing about latter-day scriptural texts such as the Pearl of Great Price or the Book of Mormon? Michiko Takayama takes on this usually thankless task by trying to use contemporary philosophy to “rescue” Joseph Smith’s work for nonbelievers. She argues that he was a poet and that his writings are poetry. Given the difficulties of such an undertaking, it should not be surprising that the result is not without problems. In this case, however, the problems are magnified by the failure of Takayama’s dissertation committee to give her the expected direction and guidance. What could have been a helpful and interesting contribution to discussions between the Saints and others is unfortunately not.

Some of the problems in Takayama’s dissertation are relatively minor, simple errors of fact. She says, for example, that no one but Joseph Smith saw the plates (p. 2) and that the extant Abraham facsimiles were rediscovered in Salt Lake City (p. 3). She relies heavily

Review of Michiko Takayama. “Poetic Language in Nineteenth Century Mormonism: A Study of Semiotic Phenomenology in Communication and Culture.” Ph.D. diss., Southern Illinois University, 1990. 145 pp. \$40.00.

on the works of Robert Lindsey¹ and Fawn Brodie² for her understanding of LDS history, though the first is more like a potboiler than a history book and the second is not without its problems, not the least of which is that, as important as *No Man Knows My History* has been in Mormon historiography, even those who are more willing than I to accept Brodie's explanations and conclusions will agree that it is now outdated. I wish that Takayama had used more standard, contemporary sources for her historical background.

My perception of other problems may be attributed to the fact that Takayama is not a believing Latter-day Saint and I am. For example, with some regularity she argues against the historicity of the Book of Mormon and other Latter-day Saint scriptures without considering the arguments in their defense that Latter-day Saint scholars have made. For example, on pages 85–86 she contends that the phrase *reformed Egyptian* not only does not, but *cannot*, refer to any historical script.³ Thus, in spite of Takayama's claim not to be dealing with the historical authenticity of Joseph Smith's writings (p. 7), she sometimes asserts their historical inauthenticity to further her arguments.

However, even if one were to ignore the minor factual errors and to agree with each of Takayama's claims about Latter-day Saint history and texts, and even if one were to overlook the inconsistency in her claim not to be interested in the historicity of Latter-day Saint scriptures, her dissertation would remain flawed. Based on my understanding of the work of the philosophers to whom she refers—Jacques Derrida, Victor Turner, and Harold Bloom—I think that she did not understand their work as well as she needed to, though it is

1. Robert Lindsey, *A Gathering of Saints: A True Story of Money, Murder, and Deceit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988).

2. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1971).

3. But see, for example, the discussions of reformed Egyptian in William J. Hamblin, "Reformed Egyptian" (FARMS, 1995); John A. Tvedtnes and Matthew Roper, "Joseph Smith's Use of the Apocrypha: Shadow or Reality?" *FARMS Review of Books* 8/2 (1996): 328–29; and John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, "Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 156–63.

fairly obvious that her lack of familiarity with their writings says at least as much about her dissertation advisors as it does about her.

Using the work of Derrida, Turner, and Bloom, Takayama says that she will address three questions: (1) Why did Joseph Smith read a Hebrew story in an Egyptian text (which she says is the problem of the signifier and, thus, the point at which an appeal to Derrida will be necessary)? (2) Why does Joseph Smith identify himself with Abraham in Abraham 1:12 (which is the problem of the signified and will require that we turn to Victor Turner)? (3) What did *hieroglyphics* mean to Joseph Smith? This, she tells us, is the problem of "the ontology of signification,"⁴ which Harold Bloom will help us understand.⁵

Juxtaposing Takayama's questions in this way shows the theoretical difficulty of her proposal and the importance of justifying her decision to harness Derrida, Turner, and Bloom together, an issue her thesis advisors should have pointed out. If we use Derrida's work to understand the relation of the signifier to the signified, then we will not be able to use Victor Turner's work to understand the signified because, according to Derrida, the signified always escapes our analysis. Either the word *signified* means different things in Derrida than it means in Turner, in which case Takayama is guilty of equivocation, or Derrida's understanding directly contradicts the project she proposes to complete using Turner, namely, to analyze the signified of the Book of Abraham. This problem should have been recognized and addressed.

Because I am more familiar with Derrida than with Turner and Bloom, let me use her chapter on his work to illustrate the difficulties I see in her analyses. The slimness of the chapter is perhaps the first

4. I do not know what this phrase means. At one point, Takayama identifies personal ontology with psychological state (p. 52), though such a use of the word *ontology* is anything but standard. This use suggests that a special vocabulary is at work here and requires explanation—something her advisors should have pointed out.

5. Without rehearsing the complexities of the arguments over signification, it is probably enough for the reader to know the terminology—signified: that to which a word or phrase points; signifier: a word or sign; signification: the process in which words or signs are correlated with things, including meanings—and that there has been considerable controversy over questions of signification. For two very different takes on the issue, see Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

sign that a problem exists. I am sympathetic to the difficulty faced by anyone trying to summarize *Of Grammatology*.⁶ It is a long and difficult book. Much of its argument relies on Derrida's assumption that his readers are familiar with the philosophical milieu in which *Of Grammatology* appeared, a milieu which espoused the ideas of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Emmanuel Lévinas.⁷ Given the difficulty of Derrida's book, it is no wonder that many of its readers have thrown up their hands in dismay or relied on the long, interpretive essay that is Gayatri Spivak's introduction. In any case, even Derrida's best reader would have difficulty giving a meaningful synopsis in seven and one-half pages.

Another problem with Takayama's discussion of Derrida is that her chapter does not accurately represent Derrida's thinking. To illustrate, consider Takayama's discussion of Derrida's notion of the "closure of the book" (pp. 68–69). She wonders whether the Book of Abraham escapes the closure of logocentrism.⁸ *Logocentrism* is a word Derrida coined for the belief that there is a metaphysical center, a unitary metaphysical explanation, standing behind reality: the *logos*. Takayama apparently does not know that Derrida has identified logocentrism with Greek culture and has *not* insisted that we must find a way beyond logocentrism.⁹ For example, he says, "Logocentrism literally, as such, is nothing else but Greek. Everywhere that the Greek culture is the dominant heritage there is logocentrism. I wouldn't draw as a conclusion, as a consequence of this, that we should simply

6. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

7. Many North American readers of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* were not familiar with these philosophers and their writings; therefore, they gave a very different meaning to the book than others did. This may partially explain why her advisors did not help her more: they were reading *Of Grammatology* in a context that gave it a very different meaning. Nevertheless, I do not think that sufficiently explains their failure.

8. She answers that it does not, though she does so by quoting what Derrida has to say about logocentrism and then concluding, "Thus, Joseph Smith's writing is a 'book' in Derrida's sense and thus is within logocentrism" (pp. 68–69).

9. However, Takayama may share her misunderstanding of this point with many of those in literary theory who were writing at about the same time as her dissertation work. Again, this is evidence of insufficient help from her dissertation advisors.

leave it behind."¹⁰ To show that the Book of Abraham is logocentric, Takayama must show that it is best understood in Greek metaphysical terms. A number of recent studies have shown (for example, that of Marlène Zarader)¹¹ that biblical writers almost certainly offer a challenge to Greek metaphysics rather than endorse it. Thus, to the degree that the Book of Abraham shares the biblical understanding of things, it does not fit the Derridean definition of the logocentric book—and even if it did, it is not necessarily a criticism to say that the Book of Abraham does not escape logocentrism.¹²

In the end, the chapter on the Book of Abraham makes two points about understanding the Book of Abraham as poetry. Those points and their conclusions can be summarized as follows:

1. Joseph Smith knew that Abraham went to Egypt and that the Egyptians worshiped idols and offered sacrifices. So when he saw Facsimile 1, he imagined that he was seeing a picture of Abraham being offered as a sacrifice in Egypt.

2. Joseph Smith's use of the word *hieroglyph* to identify some of the pictograms in the facsimiles is similar to the Egyptian use of the word, even if the referents of each are different.

3. Conclusion: Points 1 and 2 suggest that we should understand Joseph Smith's purported translation of ancient scripture as the creation of poetry: the documents we see reproduced in the facsimiles functioned as rebuses that excited his imagination and allowed him to produce the Book of Abraham.

Neither the argument of the first point nor the observation of the second relies on Derrida's work. In addition, the first is an empirical

10. Jacques Derrida, "Jacques Derrida on Rhetoric and Composition: A Conversation," interview by Gary A. Olson, in *(Inter)views: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Rhetoric and Literacy*, ed. Gary A. Olson and Irene Gale (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 140.

11. Marlène Zarader, *La dette impensée: Heidegger et l'héritage hébraïque* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990).

12. Though it was not Takayama's purpose to do so, had she shown that the Book of Abraham does not share the biblical understanding of the world and instead adopts a primarily Greek, logocentric understanding, she would have made an interesting argument against the historicity of the Book of Abraham. However, I doubt that she would need Derrida, Turner, or Bloom to support such an argument.

explanation, though Takayama has said she does not think that such explanations are important to understanding LDS scripture as poetry (see, for example, p. x). Thus it is ironic that Takayama invokes Derrida but does not need him to make her argument that the facsimiles were rebuses that worked “as a *catalyst* for the story of Abraham in Egypt” (p. 35). The problems in the discussions of Turner and Bloom are perhaps not as stark as they are in the discussion of Derrida, but they are similar.

If one does not accept Latter-day Saint claims of authenticity but wishes, nevertheless, to avoid having to choose what is often offered as the only other explanation for Joseph Smith’s work, namely fraud, then understanding the scriptures revealed through Joseph Smith as poetry is probably the best alternative available. Even with such an explanation, the problem—which Takayama has ignored—of how to avoid the charge of fraud remains, even if the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price are poetry. After all, Joseph Smith consistently insisted that he was giving us translations of ancient documents. Either he was incredibly self-deluded (perhaps so self-deluded as to be unable to escape the charge of madness), or he lied, whether or not the scriptures that came from his hand were poetic.¹³

Michiko Takayama’s attempt to make a case for LDS scripture as poetry is admirable. We should be grateful for any outside the community of the Saints who wish to give us the benefit of the doubt. However, in spite of Takayama’s friendly intentions and our obligation to be grateful to her for those intentions, her dissertation is flawed. Given the possibilities of analysis that Takayama wished to undertake, it is unfortunate that her dissertation advisors were not more demanding, critical, and helpful. Had they been, we might find ourselves with an interesting discussion to which we could respond.

13. One wonders how to account for the Doctrine and Covenants as poetry, given a view like Takayama’s.