



## Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

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Volume 19 | Number 2

Article 7

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2007

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#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Novak, Gary and Midgley, Louis (2007) "Remembrance and the Past," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 19 : No. 2 , Article 7.

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**Title** Remembrance and the Past

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**Reference** *FARMS Review* 19/2 (2007): 37-65.

**ISSN** 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

**Abstract** This article references Yosef Yerushalmi's study of the role of remembrance in the Jewish religion. Novak and Midgley claim that Latter-day Saints have a similar need for remembrance in their religion, as is demonstrated in the Book of Mormon.

# REMEMBRANCE AND THE PAST

Gary Novak and Louis Midgley

And I exhort you to remember these things. . . .

Moroni 10:27<sup>1</sup>

*This essay was drafted in 1984 after a chance reading of a book review<sup>2</sup> that called our attention to Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's account of the role of memory in Jewish identity.<sup>3</sup> He contrasted the ancient passion for remembering God's mighty acts, as well as the dire consequences of turning away from the covenants that had framed Jewish identity, with the recent withering, under the impact of modernity, of the traditional and often quite lachrymose Jewish understanding of their past. What has replaced this older understanding of the past is a flowering of Jewish historiography. This new Jewish history is primarily produced under the standards of Enlightenment skepticism of divine things. It manifests a mere curiosity about the variety and details of Jewish culture and has assisted the subsequent decline in authentic religiosity. We believe that the tale told by Yerushalmi provides a caution for Latter-day Saints as we attempt as*

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1. See Alma 37:8; compare 3 Nephi 29:3; Moroni 4:3; 5:2; Doctrine and Covenants 20:77, 79.

2. David Singer, "Testimony," review of *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Commentary* 76/1 (1983): 72–75.

3. See Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982). This volume was translated into a number of languages and then issued as a paperback (Schocken Books, 1989) with a new preface and postscript by the author and also a foreword by Harold Bloom.

*best we can to tell our own story. In addition, Yerushalmi's attention to the role of remembrance in the faith of ancient Israel has alerted us to the identical dynamic in the Book of Mormon, where covenants and their renewals, as well as faith itself, are bound up with remembrance of the mighty redeeming acts of God and hence also with the hope for a future beyond the present wilderness in which we now sojourn here below. In this essay we examine the relationship Yerushalmi sets out between the distinctive Jewish history and Jewish memory. How has Jewish memory and identity been formed and preserved and eventually transformed? We believe that memory of a portion of the past is crucial to being the covenant people. We strive to uncover parallels between ancient Israel and the latter-day "New Israel." We believe there are crucial lessons for Latter-day Saints in the Jewish experience with the past.*

According to Yosef Yerushalmi, it has been difficult to reconstruct more than a basic outline of Jewish history from the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70 to about 1700, and especially in the talmudic period.<sup>4</sup> Why? From the end of the Jewish canon until recently, there were virtually no Jewish historians and virtually no historiography. The identity of the Jews did not depend upon "ordinary history," but upon a literature that evoked the mighty acts of God and the sufferings of rebellious Israel, which served as reminders of the mercy of God, who remembers the covenant people in their troubles if they will only remember him and forsake their sins. Hence, without historians, Jews still managed to retain an identity by relying primarily upon biblical accounts.

"The Jews . . . have the reputation of being at once the most historically oriented of peoples and as possessing the longest and most tenacious of memories."<sup>5</sup> Their sacred texts have something to do with their persistence as a people. Those who once thought of themselves

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4. Between 1706 and 1711 Jacques Basnage, a French Huguenot who lived in Holland, produced a seven-volume history of the Jews, a story that had virtually ceased to be told after the time of Josephus. Expanded to fifteen volumes between 1716 and 1721, Basnage's history provided the foundation for later Jewish historical work. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 81.

5. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, xxxiii.

as covenant people did not approach the past with mere curiosity, but with profound passion; they placed God at the center of their story. In their record of encounters by seers and prophets with divine things, the biblical texts describe the mighty acts of God and tell of covenants made by man with God. They also render with striking candor the sinful rebellion and subsequent bondage of the covenant people.

“It was ancient Israel that first assigned a decisive significance to history and thus forged a new world-view whose essential premises were eventually appropriated by Christianity and Islam as well.”<sup>6</sup> “If Herodotus was the father of history, the fathers of meaning in history were the Jews.”<sup>7</sup> Yerushalmi has shown that “although Judaism throughout the ages was absorbed with the meaning of history, historiography itself played at best an ancillary role among the Jews, and often no role at all; and, concomitantly, that while memory of the past was always a central component of Jewish experience, the historian was not its primary custodian.”<sup>8</sup>

Yerushalmi shows that remembrance of the crucial words and deeds of the past, including especially the mighty acts of God, and the repentance that sometimes followed disobedience to the covenants formed the substance of the Jewish memory. God had promised to remember Israel, and Israel was commanded to keep in remembrance certain things. To forget these things was to cease to be the covenant people. But the demand that Israel remember “has little to do with curiosity about the past. Israel is told only that it must be a kingdom of priests and a holy people; nowhere is it suggested that it become a nation of historians,” as we now tend to understand history. Why? “Memory is, by its nature, selective, and the demand that Israel remember is no exception.”<sup>9</sup> Jewish memory was thus regulated by a principle of selection that “is unique unto itself.” It is God’s mighty acts in history and man’s responses to these that must be placed and kept in memory.<sup>10</sup>

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6. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 8.

7. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 8.

8. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, xxxiii.

9. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 10.

10. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 11.

Remembrance is meant to teach and warn Israel and not to inflate individual reputations or national pride, for the people of God need to know how they came to be chosen; how they have strayed, both collectively and individually, from the correct path; and how they might once again regain favor with God by turning to him and away from their sins and thereby showing the fruits of repentance. Israel must plead with God for forgiveness because she has never managed to offer to God an offering in righteousness. Memory is the key to keeping the commandments. Yerushalmi shows how this memory did not flow from a history done out of curiosity (that is a modern thing) but from a history that preserved the crucial story of God's dealings with his covenant people and the subsequent halting responses, the substance of which is a dialectic of obedience and rebellion, of liberation and bondage, of prosperity and suffering, of human agents in rebellion against the divine will.<sup>11</sup>

### The Vessels of Remembrance

“No more dramatic evidence is needed for the dominant place of history in ancient Israel,” according to Yerushalmi,

than the overriding fact that even God is known only insofar as he reveals himself “historically.” Sent to bring the tidings of deliverance to the Hebrew slaves, Moses does not come in the name of the Creator of Heaven and Earth, but of the “God of the fathers,” that is to say, as the God of history: “Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them: The Lord the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has appeared to me and said: I have surely remembered you . . .” (Exod. 3:16). When God introduces himself directly to the entire people at Sinai, nothing is heard of his essence or

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11. Yerushalmi examines the passages in which remembrance is commanded in the name of the Lord. Forms of the verb *zakhar* turn up in the “[Hebrew] Bible no less than one hundred and sixty-nine times, usually with either Israel or God as the subject, for memory is incumbent upon both.” Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 5 (see p. 119 n. 1 for references to other relevant studies). The admonition to remember turns up 227 times in the Book of Mormon and an additional 62 times in the Doctrine and Covenants.

attributes, but only: “I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, the house of bondage” (Exod. 20:2). That is sufficient. For here as elsewhere, ancient Israel knows what God is from what he has done in history. And if that is so, then memory has become crucial to its faith and, ultimately, to its very existence.<sup>12</sup>

God’s mighty acts, including special revelations and the covenant founding of the people of God, are portrayed in the Bible as actual events. If the hopes and expectations of further deliverance still involve a real future for the faithful, it follows that for Israel the remembrance of those events is crucial to the existence of the covenant people of God.

When Abraham, Moses, or Enoch is understood as having been instructed by heavenly messengers, such ought to be remembered. To forget the then and there of divine disclosure is to lose contact with God here and now. The result of such a forgetting is to follow some alien tradition into darkness and the captivity of sin. A primary vehicle for remembering the prophetic words and covenants, in addition to the biblical text, was ritual—ritual supported by recitals buttressed by narratives that chronicle the making of those covenants and also provide accounts of certain elements of God’s dealings with Israel and the resulting dialectic of obedient response and willful rebellion. The passion of remembering those things was felt by ancient Israel. The biblical history is thus the fruit of the prophetically enjoined effort to remember the words and deeds that form the tragic yet hopeful dialectic between Israel and God.

The writing of such narratives ceased with the passing of the prophetic gifts. Henceforth Jews might preserve memories of covenants and an earlier apocalyptic, recite the grim but awesome and yet hopeful story of covenants and prophetic special revelations, at times take comfort in apocalyptic visions, long for the vindication of the covenant people and even be induced to follow various messianic figures. But more than anything, they were busy recounting the story of Israel’s sinful forgetting and repentant remembering. There were, of

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12. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 9.

course, commentaries on the sacred texts and also commentaries on those commentaries. Until transformed by the charms of modernity, Jews would mostly ignore the doing of history, especially as it is now commonly understood; they engaged instead in the careful study of the sacred texts, and the preservation of traditions. The inventiveness of the learned was turned to invoking the past already set out in the sacred texts and interpreted in the commentaries of the faithful. The result was a literature of power and haunting beauty.<sup>13</sup>

Since the rabbis had in the sacred texts the key to the meaning of history, and having no prophetic gifts with which to initiate further extensions of the historical substance of these texts, they had no need for historiography. That does not mean that they did not see divine providence at work, for they did, but under the patterns, categories, and explanations already set down.

For the rabbis the Bible was not only a repository of past history, but a revealed pattern of the whole of history, and they had learned their scriptures well. They knew that history has a purpose, the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth, and that the Jewish people had a central role to play in the process. They were convinced that the covenant between God and Israel was eternal, though the Jews had often rebelled and suffered the consequences. Above all, they had learned from the Bible that the true pulse of history often beat beneath its manifest surfaces, an invisible history that was more real than what the world, deceived by the more strident outward rhythms of power, could recognize.<sup>14</sup>

### Jewish History and the Acids of Modernity

Before modernity began to unravel Jewish historical memory and piety, the identity of the covenant people depended upon the memory of divine promises and yielded the dialectic of obedience and rebellion

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13. Yerushalmi illustrates the power and beauty of various devices that invoke memory and erase the distance between the past and present. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 29, 43.

14. David Singer, "Testimony," *Commentary* 76/1 (July 1983): 74.



that was the substance of sacred history. For generations the accounts of covenants with Abraham and Moses filled the hearts and minds of the faithful. This changed radically when Jews suddenly confronted the modern world with its own curiosity about the past and compulsion to explain the past in secular or naturalistic terms. Modernity challenged the historical orientation of the Jews in part by questioning the biblical accounts. The new history excluded the divine from human history or rendered the religious past ordinary and harmless by reducing the divine to a universal human response to the terrors of nature and the distempers of human affairs. On the other hand, accommodations to modernity have resulted in a remarkable blossoming of Jewish historical studies. And these have been done by learned and inventive scholars. By secular standards, this new Jewish historiography is done as well as any other history.

Some have questioned whether this new historiography, whatever its charms and accomplishments, has been good for the Jewish faith<sup>15</sup> or even unambiguously good for the Jewish community. These complaints do not come from kooks on the fringes. Those reflecting on the consequences of the new Jewish history express dismay at the disintegration of Jewish memory and identity. The new Jewish history has vastly multiplied, thinned, and flattened Jewish memory; it has also weakened Jewish identity by changing the traditional categories and understandings. The new history is not written from the horizon provided by the canon and supporting literature, nor does it employ the traditional vocabulary or selection principles; it is written from a perspective in which Jews are “paralyzed by the need to appear apologetic before the non-Jewish world. Apologetics demanded that Judaism be portrayed as a familiar rather than foreign belief.”<sup>16</sup> Jewish historians have sought to place Judaism within the general development of religion.

Jewish historiography, with the rise of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (scientific investigation of Judaism), “confidently pushes her way to the very center and brazenly demands her due. For the

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15. David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 2–8.

16. Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 3.

first time it is not history that must prove its utility to Judaism, but Judaism that must prove its validity to history, by revealing and justifying itself historically.”<sup>17</sup> “Modern Jewish historiography began precipitously out of that assimilation from without and collapse from within which characterized the sudden emergence of Jews out of the ghetto. It originated, not as scholarly curiosity, but as ideology, one of a gamut of responses to the crisis of Jewish emancipation and the struggle to attain it.”<sup>18</sup>

Yerushalmi has also striven to understand himself “as a Jewish historian, not within the objective context of the global scholarly enterprise, but within the inner framework of Jewish history itself. With the former I have no particular problems—that is, none that are not shared by historians in other fields. Given that it is important to consume most of one’s waking hours in the study of the past, Jewish historical scholarship is as significant as any other and its achievements are manifest. From the perspective of Jewish history, however, it is different.”<sup>19</sup> Although Jews have been absorbed with finding meaning in history, and therefore the “memory of the past was always a central component of Jewish experience, the historian was not its primary custodian.”<sup>20</sup>

And in the nineteenth century, when the Jewish past became the arena of the assimilated historian, it was no longer transmitted as the core of the faith. Jewish historians used the categories drawn from the secular culture. Everything was disputed as well as discovered by the historian. The new Jewish history introduced contention into the life of the community. The historian, under the impact of modernity, did not act as conduit for memory or bearer of tradition, but became an active agent with respect to the past—constantly discovering something novel, striving for the unexpected, challenging, interesting, or entertaining. As secularized Jews turned to history, anxious

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17. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 84.

18. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 85. “The overweening desire of partially acculturated Jews to enter the German bourgeoisie motivated in them an apologetic stance that sapped Judaism of any authenticity.” Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 3.

19. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, xiii–xiv.

20. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, xiv.

to escape into the respectability of gentile culture, eager for political emancipation and full access to the glories of the larger society, they were freed to invent or to adopt gentile categories of historical explanation—they no longer invoked those already set down in the sacred texts. The traditional understandings and standards of interpretation were replaced by those brought to the study of Jewish things from outside, from the gentile world. Secular history became an avenue for Jews to enter a seemingly glamorous gentile world.

Modern Jewish historiography was thus grounded on assumptions that run counter to the substance of Jewish faith. And the proliferation of this new Jewish history transformed the substance of faith.

There is an inherent tension in modern Jewish historiography even though most often it is not felt on the surface nor even acknowledged. To the degree that this historiography is indeed “modern” and demands to be taken seriously, it must at least functionally repudiate premises that were basic to all Jewish conceptions of history in the past. In effect, it must stand in sharp opposition to its own subject matter, not on this or that detail, but concerning the vital core: the belief that divine providence is not only an ultimate but an active causal factor in Jewish history, and the related belief in the uniqueness of Jewish history itself.<sup>21</sup>

It is a “conscious denial, or at least the pragmatic evasion, of these two cardinal assumptions that constitutes the essence of the secularization of Jewish history on which modern Jewish historiography is grounded.”<sup>22</sup>

The roots of this secularization date from 1670 with the appearance of Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*, the first open attack on biblical faith from within the Jewish community.<sup>23</sup> But it was in the nineteenth century that this process reached its peak. Judaism came

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21. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 89.

22. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 89.

23. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 89; compare Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken, 1965).

to be understood as merely part of the larger development of “religion,” like all other manifestations of human piety and communal devotion, or as merely another exemplar of human folly and illusion. Two of the most sophisticated and powerful rejections of “religion,” those of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, came from assimilated Jews bent on settling accounts with their own seemingly “primitive” past. When “religion” was not understood as delusion or illusion, it was understood on the assumption that all peoples share some “sentiments” that are the essence of religion. It was also believed that these sentiments are undergoing a process of unfolding over time. When the acids of modernity did not yield rejection of the faith, as was the case with Marx and Freud, they ate away at the foundations. “If the secularization of Jewish history is a break with the past, the historicizing of Judaism itself has been an equally significant departure. It could hardly be otherwise. Western man’s discovery of history is not a mere interest in the past . . . , but a new awareness, a perception of a fluid temporal dimension from which nothing is exempt.”<sup>24</sup>

If every expression of piety is but a manifestation of some larger inclusive entity called “religion,” then all are somehow on a rough parity and no one is simply true in the way that is understood from within the categories of faith. Even when there were protests against the relativizing historicism that engulfed every faith within a so-called religious development, such protests have gone unheeded.<sup>25</sup>

When confronted by modernity Jews began to long for “assimilation” into gentile culture. Prior to that encounter, Jewish identity was challenged more by apostasy than by cultural assimilation. But in the nineteenth century, as Jews desired a place within the intellectual and political community of Western Europe, the Jewish identity was

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24. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 91.

25. Leopold Zunz, in his *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, tried to convince Germans of “the true value of the Jewish experience” (from Chaim Potok, *Wanderings: Chaim Potok’s History of the Jews* [New York: Fawcett Crest, 1980], 493). What fueled this scholarly undertaking was “the allure of this brimming bourgeois culture, then at its zenith— . . . it was all too dazzling; and their own Jewish learning was too shallow.” Potok, *Wanderings*, 492–93. And all this sort of thing was done “through rigorous objective criticism and modern methods of research.” Potok, *Wanderings*, 492.

eroded by assimilation. Complaints about the decay of Jewish memory are but manifestations of a larger pattern of concern over attrition through assimilatory processes.

### The Mormon Side of the Analogy

A consideration of these concerns provides lessons for those Latter-day Saints who currently yearn for a science of Mormon things and have embraced what some call “New Mormon History,” which promises, much like secularized Jewish history, to liberate them from parochial things—especially from what is considered naïveté about Mormon origins—and thereby to allow a more secure identity in the larger development of American religion and culture. In 1974 Robert Flanders claimed that “a significantly different understanding of the Latter-day Saint past has begun to emerge.” This “New Mormon History,” from this perspective, is a new departure, not a mere refinement of older understandings. “In sum, the New Mormon History is a modern history, informed by modern trends of thought, not only in history, but in other humanistic and scientific disciplines as well, including philosophy, social psychology, economics, and religious studies.” The concern of this new history is not the truth claims of the faith, but centers on “the significance of the Mormon experience” and the place of that experience in the larger web of American culture and religious development.<sup>26</sup> The New History provides a comfortable place for cultural Mormonism within the imagined fabric of the development of American religion because it is unconcerned with the truth, coherence, or internal logic of the faith as such. Flanders was once interested in discovering just how the Mormon past fit “satisfactorily into the main stream of American history where it belongs and where it can be better understood.”<sup>27</sup>

What are the assumptions at work in this so-called New History? The expression *New Mormon History* was first defended as a description of a history that flows from the urge “to discover Mormon history

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26. Robert B. Flanders, “Some Reflections on the New Mormon History,” *Dialogue* 9/1 (1974): 34, 35, 40.

27. Robert B. Flanders, “Writing on the Mormon Past,” *Dialogue* 1/3 (1966): 47.

as a legitimate rather than an aberrant phenomenon in American culture. As a result . . . , a kind of new middle ground has been created between those with and those without LDS faith assumptions, with the accompanying possibility of communication between them that does not have to struggle with the *a priori* of the legitimacy of the faith assumptions.”<sup>28</sup> This seems to match nicely with our Jewish example. The label *New Mormon History* may sometimes, of course, have been appropriated with a different program in mind; some might merely wish to do history more accurately or more comprehensively or in closer conformity with the categories of the scriptures. But the label was promoted by Flanders to identify radical shifts in the understanding of Mormon origins. *New Mormon History*, for Flanders, provided “a new location where ‘marginal’ Latter-day Saints, who hold some faith assumptions but reject others, or who are attached to Mormon societies or social networks but not to the religion *per se*, can share in the dialogue about the significance of the Mormon experience.”<sup>29</sup>

One issue concerns the political position of both Jewish and Mormon apologetics. What is at stake is the persistence of faith with its distinctive form of memory or historical consciousness that maintains identity over time. Yerushalmi’s concern “is not historical writing *per se* . . . , but the relation of Jews to their own past, and the place of the historian within that relationship.”<sup>30</sup> Can we learn from the concerns being expressed by Jewish scholars over the burgeoning Jewish historiography? “Only in the modern era do we really find, for the first time,” according to Yerushalmi, “a Jewish historiography divorced from Jewish collective memory and, in crucial respects, thoroughly at odds with it.”<sup>31</sup> The destruction of historical memory is not, however, merely a problem facing Jews. Others see their traditions, ways, and memories in disarray. “There are many within Jewry today who deplore the widespread decay of Jewish memory even while, perhaps symptomatically, sharing no real consensus as to its original or

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28. Flanders, “Some Reflections on the New Mormon History,” 40.

29. Flanders, “Some Reflections on the New Mormon History,” 40.

30. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 6.

31. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 93.

ideal content. Who, then, can be expected to step into the breach, if not the historian? Is it not both his chosen and appointed task to restore the past to us all?"<sup>32</sup> But why should the secularized historian, whose ideology is the source of the problem, become the healer when the memory "never depended on historians in the first place"? Jewish memory and faith cannot be healed until or unless the "group itself finds healing, unless its wholeness is restored or rejuvenated."<sup>33</sup> Such a restoration would constitute the grounds for a worthy community, a Zion called out of Babylon. Historians, under thrall to modernity, are thus at best pathologists rather than physicians, and they are among the least adequate caretakers of sacred things, though they may be good morticians.

Religious history done in naturalistic terms and intended to please secular tastes stands directly in the way of the life of the memories shared by believers that constitute the ground for a community of faith and a people of God. What the professional historian does, both by inclination and training, is create a whole new set of memories that tends to replace the old ones that have been rejected for various reasons; historians do not merely busy themselves telling the old story and filling in the details or telling the story more accurately—such would be unobjectionable. Jewish historians, with a good conscience, are busy whittling away at sacred things; the product is their New History.

In its quest for understanding it brings to the fore texts, events, processes, that never really became part of Jewish group memory even when it was at its most vigorous. With unprecedented energy it continually re-creates an ever more detailed past whose shapes and textures memory does not recognize. But that is not all. The historian does not simply come in to replenish the gaps of memory. He constantly challenges even those memories that have survived intact. Moreover, in common with historians in all fields of inquiry, he seeks ultimately to recover a total past—in this case the entire Jewish past—even if

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32. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 93.

33. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 94.

he is directly concerned with only a segment of it. No subject is potentially unworthy of his interest, no document, no artifact, beneath his attention.<sup>34</sup>

In a faith grounded in history there is bound to be much selecting, winnowing, sorting, and condensing. But that is true of all attempts to do history. Not everything is memorable. Not all the things that happen to have been left around for the historian to locate as grist for his mill are significant from the perspective of the norms of the faith. And even more importantly, not every possible way of telling the story of the past is consistent with faith in God's mighty acts. Thus the flux of interpretations and explanations that secularized historians necessarily generate may dissolve the content of faith. Sometimes this has been done inadvertently; sometimes it is intentional. If we can compare high things with low things, we might see some parallels between Spinoza's powerful mockery of the Bible and the recent attacks on the Book of Mormon coming from the margins of the Mormon community<sup>35</sup> and delineating the bold versions of the New Mormon History.

According to Yerushalmi, historians question, dispute, and evaluate from grounds that reject the possibility of faith. Still there are some Jews who remain within what he calls the "enchanted circle of tradition" and who have not been entirely secularized nor had the substance of their faith wrenched away from them by debunking and relativizing historians. Those charmed believers see certain elements of the past as still somehow directly before them in a kind of eternal contemporaneity. They do not concern themselves with how or whether it all took place, but only with its immediate emotional impact for them; nor do they always see their Jewish past as a clue to their own future. They remain blind to the contents and consequences of the debates of the historians about the Jewish past. It is an anti-historical attitude that seeks

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34. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 93–94.

35. William D. Russell, "A Further Inquiry into the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone* 7/5 (1982): 20–27; William D. Russell, "History and the Mormon Scriptures," *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1983): 53–63; George D. Smith, "Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon," *Free Inquiry* 4/1 (1983/84): 20–31; "The History of Mormonism and Church Authorities: An Interview with Sterling M. McMurrin," *Free Inquiry* 4/1 (1983/84): 32–34.



the promises accompanying the covenants without the historical component, thereby betraying the profoundly historical orientation of prophetic piety. Are there such attitudes within the community of Saints? If the acids of modernity dissolve the historical foundations of faith, then only a thoughtless stupor, a vague sentiment, or perhaps mystical flight remains open to the one who wishes to grasp some fragment of faith. It may be beyond the scope of modern historical consciousness to decide which “history” among various alternative accounts is superior; it is not, however, beyond the scope of prophetic faith.

### The Saints Confront Modernity

Through their professional standing, historians in the Latter-day Saint cultural setting seem to have gained a measure of control over the past. As this extends to the doing of Mormon history, it suggests that historians will have a crucial and perhaps even decisive role in either enlarging or shrinking the memory of the Saints and thus forming and transforming their identity. But those involved in writing Mormon history have given little attention to the question of the historian’s role as caretaker or guardian of the identity of the Saints.

Our survey on the results of the explosion of Jewish historical works since 1700 yields the conclusion that this new historical scholarship has had profoundly corrosive effects on Jewish memory and identity, and it suggests that a faith with broad and deep links to history, such as the faith of the Latter-day Saints, may also confront some of the same difficulties if its history is done by historians armed with secular ideologies and eager for acceptance by the larger culture. Leonard J. Arrington once claimed that most historians believe that “Mormon life is fair game for detached examination and clarification. They believe that the details of Mormon history and culture can be studied in human or naturalistic terms—indeed, must be so studied—and without thus rejecting the divinity of the Church’s origin and work.”<sup>36</sup> No clear indication has been given of exactly what

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36. Leonard J. Arrington, “Scholarly Studies of Mormonism in the Twentieth Century,” *Dialogue* 1/1 (1966): 28.

might constitute “human or naturalistic terms,” other than hints that such would involve detached historians doing “objective” history. Unfortunately, there has been no effort made to show how the faith might survive a treatment of its historical roots done in “naturalistic terms.” There has been virtually no public discussion of the possibility that a history of Mormon things, especially as it deals with the historical foundations of faith, if done in these terms, may profoundly transform the faith. Since the history that forms the basis and even much of the content of the faith has been exposed to constant contention from the beginning, the Saints are more or less armed to defend themselves from onslaughts from without; but their trusting attitude to those who seemingly speak with authority makes them more vulnerable to a revisionism from within.

It has been assumed that historians will be honest truth seekers and that professional norms will somehow prevent the penetration of distorting ideologies into their work. But it is forgotten that historians, themselves situated historically, have been indoctrinated, often unknowingly, in the ideologies of a secularized world. As they go about interpreting texts and explaining things using secular categories, they introduce background assumptions that are different from the assumptions that form the core of the faith. Our concern is with these assumptions, and especially with the common assumption that the history of the Saints must be done in “naturalistic terms.” Such an approach would mean that any possibility of divine things, as understood from within the faith, be jettisoned by the historian as she tells her story. Historians have not reflected deeply, if one can judge from the literature, on the fundamental assumptions at work in their doing of history. They may not even be aware of them. In addition, they may be at one time working with one set of assumptions and at another time working with a radically different set or mixture of background assumptions. Our interest is in the potentially corrosive effect of those secular assumptions—of modernity—on the memory and identity of the Latter-day Saints.

The analogy between Mormon and Jewish memory seems to provide some useful lessons. The transformation of memory that is traced

by some distinguished Jewish scholars to the new Jewish historiography presents a spectacle that is worth thoughtful attention. Have Latter-day Saint historians addressed the issues raised by Yerushalmi? It would seem that the destruction of Jewish memory and communal identity can offer vital lessons for those who do Mormon history and are genuinely concerned with the welfare of the covenant people.

In our present cultural setting, historians, professionally trained or otherwise, either within or without the community of Saints, are not likely to disappear, and interest in or controversy over the Latter-day Saint past is not likely to subside. Hence it is crucial for the Saints to have their own history told from within or, as a bare minimum, not told from outside the categories, assumptions, and norms of the faith.

Though it is part of the current secular mythology that prophetic faith has much to fear from honest history and hence cannot possibly confront its own history, it seems that, keeping in mind the Jewish analogy, nothing is more likely to produce a deterioration of faith than an inauthentic, not to mention incompetent, telling of the story of that faith. This may be done either through mindless inadvertence or with some intention of reconstructing the faith by manipulating or controlling the past with explanatory frameworks or interpretative schema that begin with the assumption that the faith is simply not true, which would seem to involve a form of the fallacy of begging the question.

The primary intellectual encounter between Judaism and modern culture has lain precisely in a mutual preoccupation with the historicity of things. As a result there is not a field of Jewish learning today which, to the degree that it is modern, is not “historical,” and only insofar as they are historically oriented have the disciplines of Jewish scholarship impinged upon cognate fields of general scholarship, a process now constantly accelerating.<sup>37</sup>

The end result is that “for the first time history, not a sacred text, becomes the arbiter of Judaism.”<sup>38</sup>

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37. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 85–86.

38. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 86.

In our cultural setting it is commonly assumed that professional historians should control the interpretation of the past since they are believed to have at their command powerful tools to penetrate to the truth in ways not previously possible. To the degree that Latter-day Saint historians have published well-received histories of their religion, they have begun to have a crucial and perhaps even decisive role in enlarging, shrinking, or preserving the communal memory of the Saints and thus in forming and transforming their identity. This has been recognized by Leonard Arrington. In addressing the question of the historian's role as guardian of Mormon identity, he asked: "Are we authentic Latter-day Saints (i.e., real Mormons) unless we receive messages from our collective past?"<sup>39</sup> The answer seems to be that we would not be real Saints unless we received authentic messages from the past that constitute our individual and communal memory. To this point, at least, we seem to have a statement about the links between history and the identity of the Saints that is close to some of Yerushalmi's views on Jewish memory and history.

What of the possibility that the work of historians may sometimes threaten faith with a corrupting secularization, or that incompetently or thoughtlessly done history may yield a fundamental reconstruction of that faith? This would seem to be a special danger when the historian goes about reinterpreting and explaining the crucial generative events with secular categories and in "naturalistic terms." Sometimes these transformations are subtle and go unnoticed; at other times they are more open. Be that as it may, there has been virtually no response by prominent Latter-day Saint historians to the recent spate of essays by certain cultural Mormons attacking the foundations of the faith, including especially the Book of Mormon. Are we to assume that historians, even those deeply troubled by a divided loyalty, are the proper caretakers of the Latter-day Saint past? "And who but the historian is prepared to relay authentic messages from the past? Our individual and collective authenticity as Latter-day Saints depends on

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39. Leonard J. Arrington, "The Search for Truth and Meaning in Mormon History," *Dialogue* 3/2 (1968): 65.

the historians telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about our past.”<sup>40</sup>

But can we ever be certain that the truth has been told about the past? Are the accounts provided by historians anything more than conjectures, models, or theories that, as such, cannot ever get to the truth or objective reality of the past? As Latter-day Saint historians become familiar with the literature on the philosophy of science and hermeneutics, they realize that the dream of an objective account of the past, of a presuppositionless history, is a chimera resting on questionable assumptions.

Historians are frequently in thrall to various notions about the possibility of an “objective history.” This view contrasts with the opinion of Thomas Alexander, an apologist for the New History who claims that no accounts of the past are objective but are always necessarily tentative and that “historians are not working with general laws.”<sup>41</sup> And he seems confident that his fellow historians involved in revisionist history fully understand and accept such agnostic views on these matters. Be that as it may, if he is correct about the impossibility of an objective history, what exactly would constitute the “whole truth” about the Mormon past and form the substance of the authentic messages from the past that would make us “real Mormons”? Would the work of historians doing the New History with explanations borrowed from the social sciences provide such a thing? Would a history done in “human or naturalistic terms” necessarily have advantages over a history done from within the categories and assumptions of the faith? This agnosticism about historical objectivity would seem to have demolished the New History’s pretenses to having occupied some higher ground upon which to assess the past.

In light of Yerushalmi’s arguments, is it obvious that historians, especially those who do history in “naturalistic terms,” are the ones best fitted to know and transmit the truth about the sacred past? Can the story of God’s mighty acts be appropriately told in naturalistic terms?

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40. Arrington, “Search for Truth and Meaning,” 65.

41. Thomas G. Alexander, “An Approach to the Mormon Past,” review of *Mormonism and the American Experience*, by Klaus J. Hansen, *Dialogue* 16/4 (1983): 148.

If secularized historians are to function as the guardians of sacred history, then processes analogous to those that fueled the transformation of Jewish historical memory are likely to have profound consequences for the future of the restored gospel. Virtually nothing has appeared in print that considers the impact of modernity on Latter-day Saint historiography or the role of the ideological indoctrination that goes on in graduate schools and in the professional settings where historians operate. Nor has there been a serious consideration of the effects these things have on the doing of Mormon history. Rather, the assumption seems to have been that the truth about the Mormon past, including the messages that contain the crucial norms and categories by which we define ourselves as Saints, depends upon the understanding of the past provided by historians. Yet if the historian is unable to tell the truth about the past—the crucial past from which, according to Arrington, the Saints must somehow acquire their identity—then the ground for that understanding of the past is, as Leo Strauss would say, merely “a figment of the imagination of the historian.”<sup>42</sup>

Those troubled by doubts or misgivings about the truth of the restored gospel have often turned to history and to the textual sources that provide access to the past. But they have done so not for an understanding of God’s mighty acts, nor for a pattern with which to build Zion, nor for a map with which to begin fleeing Babylon, but for arguments with which to reconstruct the substance of the faith. The New History is not celebrated for its literary grace or greater accuracy, nor for its deep understanding of the dialectic between God and man, nor for its contributions in building the kingdom. It is sometimes applauded because it seems to promise to place control of the past in the hands of those who wish to alter the content of faith or because it allows the history of the Saints to be done in “naturalistic terms” or with fashionable explanations borrowed from the social sciences.

Some historians, deeply troubled by their own doubts about the historical foundations of the faith, have recently opined that exactly nothing that concerns faith depends in any crucial or decisive way

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42. Leo Strauss, “How to Study Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), 143.

upon what can be learned from the past or upon any statement about what may have taken place in the past. And, at times, lengthy autobiographical descriptions have been offered of exactly how and when they came to hold such views. In these remarkable addresses there is boasting about the liberating power of secularized accounts of the Mormon past and a celebration of the scholarly detachment of historians bent on debunking the understanding of the Saints. But these addresses merely contain a flow of opinions with no reasons given to justify them.

### Historical Truth?

Why should we assume that the stories told by historians are more than the work of the imagination? Are not these accounts essentially inventions controlled largely by uncritically accepted assumptions? Well, we have certain primary texts, those traces of the past. They provide some control, do they not?

But in all reflections on experience, including historical accounts and even our own individual stories, there is interpretation and a work of construction and imagination. This is true especially when the work of the historian is grounded on a passionate struggle with texts. It would seem impossible for one to have any experience that is not itself coupled with interpretation, and every casual or serious reflection on our experiences will involve additional interpretations of those experiences. Even (or especially) when we memorialize some incident in our lives, we interpret and explain; we do not merely report in some detached, mechanical manner. The report itself is necessarily an interpretation and perhaps explanation. Hence there is no such thing as an “objective historian,” and “objective” history is merely the understanding of the past that we have objectified through writing. The object is what the historian produces and not the past about which some things are written—the past is always our understanding of it and not an object before our eyes. The only things that we can have before our eyes are the texts that memorialize the understandings of the past. Through these we have access to the words and deeds of the past. These we believe are worth our attention, and some are even

worthy of remembrance. Every understanding of the past is thus some particular point of view. But which one is, to use Arrington's striking expression, the "whole truth"?

Which historical account yields an understanding of "events as they actually happened"? Obviously that depends upon what one means by "truth." And it also depends upon exactly what one will allow within the realm of possibilities and hence upon the background assumptions or frameworks one brings to the task of understanding the past. These possibilities, influenced by our preunderstandings and by our language, affect our categories of interpretation and explanation.

But we are now being told that our history simply cannot be done any longer on the basis of assumptions that include the possibility that God acts in history or that messengers could visit prophets. One striking bit of such dogmatism has it that "you don't get books from angels and translate them by miracles; it is just that simple."<sup>43</sup> Sterling McMurrin opines that "the church shouldn't tie religious faith to its history." He also complains that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints "has concealed much of its history from its people."<sup>44</sup> These opinions appear to be a way of saying that the understanding of Mormon origins held by the faithful rests on a different framework of assumptions than McMurrin's naturalistic understanding of those events. He begins with positivist assumptions, including a dogmatic rejection of the possibility that heavenly messengers may visit with prophets, and then begs the question from that point on. The faithful will at least grant the possibility that God has acted and see where it takes them. When the faithful tell the story of the people of God, McMurrin sees that as a clear indication of a suppression of the truth and as a failure to face the truth about unseemly elements in the past. Something becomes "unseemly" when it does not fit easily within the dogmas of his positivist (or naturalistic) ideology.

We also have the case of an author complaining that some fellow writer of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day

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43. McMurrin, "History of Mormonism and Church Authorities," 34.

44. McMurrin, "History of Mormonism and Church Authorities," 32.



Saints (now the Community of Christ) has made a dreadful mistake because “he . . . seems to uncritically assume that alleged contact with supernatural beings actually occurred, a faith assumption which the historian—lacking methods of verification—cannot make.”<sup>45</sup> That statement implies that historians cannot be believers and that believers cannot be historians. There is a confusion here between the role of assumptions when one seeks to test statements (assuming that verification is possible) and the actual testing of those statements. An assumption is exactly what is not verified. Hence, when the historian begins to tell stories, the assumptions upon which the plot is fashioned will not have been verified; that is exactly why they are called assumptions.

When we write history we are, whether we realize it or not, interpreting and explaining texts. And it seems unlikely that one can provide a presuppositionless interpretation of a text or a presuppositionless account of the past. What this means, among other things, is that all historians must operate with something like what our Community of Christ friends like to call “faith assumptions.” Likewise, every explanation will be in terms of some tentative theory resting again on assumptions. The mistake, and it is common among those involved in the New History, is an uncritical acceptance of a crude version of old war-horse positivism. And it is one that should not be forthcoming among those familiar with the recent literature on the philosophy of science or on hermeneutics. But it is one that some historians who are often not concerned with such things are wont to make. In addition, while historians are pleased to look in on the presumably naïve views held by people in the past, they find much less pleasure in having a careful scrutiny made of their own assumptions.

The naïve understanding of the past that commonly carries the name *positivism* among historians assumes that the historian has directly before him an objective reality called “the past,” or some finite segment of it, and that it is possible—if one is detached, objective,

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45. William D. Russell, “Swarming Progeny of the Restoration,” review of *Divergent Paths of the Restoration: A History of the Latter Day Saint Movement*, by Steven L. Shields, *Dialogue* 16/4 (1983): 160.

neutral, not evaluative, not emotionally involved—to come up with some neutral-observation sentences that simply yield what is the “whole truth” about the past. With these neutral-observation statements (or historical “facts”), one can verify one’s theories about the past that were drawn from those observations. Hence one can produce objective accounts of the past and tell the story of “what really did happen.” In this view, the only limitations on the historian in providing the “whole truth” about the past are (1) the failure to achieve detachment and (2) the absence of “evidence,” that is, the textual sources of history. With such assumptions, the historian eventually tells, whether he wants to or not, a story of Mormon origins that leaves out (that is, explains away) the story of the visits of heavenly messengers with prophets and the mighty acts of God. We are admonished that we cannot properly tell the story of Mormon things, especially the crucial story of Mormon origins, with the assumption that God revealed anything, that messengers from another world visited with prophets, and so forth, because none of those things fit within the objective, that is, verifiable, world of natural objects.<sup>46</sup>

History cannot really harm faith, James Clayton claims, because it and “fundamental religious beliefs . . . seldom meet.” It is, however, evident that prophetic faith necessarily involves links between faith and history. For example, statements about the revelation of the Torah to Moses or that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ involve faith in history. Clayton simply ignores such considerations. He holds, instead, that the “historian cannot prove historically that any of these beliefs are true and certainly cannot apply these beliefs to his or her scholarly research because there is no historically acceptable evidence of God, divine intervention, or life after death. Historians have no way to discern the hand of God or to measure the validity of inspiration,” and so on.<sup>47</sup> He would, of course, be correct if he had in mind a historian whose explanatory framework rested on positivist assumptions. Such a historian could not discern the hand of God in history, and such

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46. See, for example, James L. Clayton, “Does History Undermine Faith?” *Sunstone*, March–April, 1982, 37–38.

47. Clayton, “Does History Undermine Faith?” 37–38.

an explanatory framework might provide an excuse for not applying even the historian's own deepest faith to history. Clayton's historian would exclude God's mighty acts from history. Such a historian could treat in "naturalistic terms" beliefs about divine things, but only on the assumption that they are sentiments that are simply unfounded. Clayton strives to reduce faith to irrational sentiments. Since the very "wellsprings of religion" are merely "mystical experiences," the historian, he concludes, cannot "corrupt them," nor can he confirm or disconfirm them. This curious argument rests upon various dogmatic assumptions about history and faith that are employed rhetorically to reduce the content of faith to socially conditioned sentiments. History in such an ideology is believed to rest on proven truths.

The resulting accounts of the faith of the believer are not the "whole truth" that the historian has been able, with his own interpretive and explanatory framework, to verify; they are simply a figment of the imagination of the historian who insisted on letting his positivist assumptions dictate precisely what the truth about the past can or cannot be.

This view of what constitutes "truth" in history is a notion of simple correspondence between the "facts" about the past and our statements about the past. This view is common among those who assume that the task of the historian is verification of statements about the past with evidences that have a standing apart from the understandings, biases, temperament, disposition, or framework of the historian. Believers, according to this objectivist point of view, simply invent things because their beliefs corrupt their understanding by introducing biases and prejudices. Latter-day Saint historians, in this scenario, must detach themselves from their own beliefs and suspend faith in order to allow the truth about the past to be spoken to them by the facts of history. The goal is objectivity. Those who hold this view, recognizing certain but not all of its more obvious defects, begin by granting that, of course, as a practical matter such complete objectivity is impossible, but they maintain it is still an admirable ideal and one that their own professional training fits them to approximate rather closely or at

least better than those still corrupted by “faith assumptions.”<sup>48</sup> In this naïve or unreflective view of the standing of the historian, the truth about the past consists of demonstrable assertions, and prophetic claims are either untestable or demonstrably false; hence we are thus forbidden to begin with the assumption that special divine revelations might have taken place. Without that possibility, the story of Latter-day Saint origins is not the one that fills the hearts and minds of the Saints; it becomes merely a story of human folly.

It should be evident that historical accounts resting upon positivist assumptions concerning the structure of the world will not be inherently or obviously superior to those resting on assumptions that have been glibly labeled and thereby denigrated as “faith assumptions.” The reason is that the positivist assumptions of historians are themselves problematic, if not incoherent. Both sets of assumptions rest, ultimately, on a choice that is a matter of faith. The truth of any matter, therefore, depends upon the assumptions one adopts. The more adequate conception of truth therefore becomes a crucial, even decisive, question.

What we have of the past are textual sources. These are merely the traces of words and deeds that are already interpretations and explanations. Should we presume to substitute some fashionable new understandings for the old ones? Are the new versions obviously superior to the old ones merely because they are new? When dealing with textual accounts of prophetic revelations, including visits with heavenly messengers, must we begin with the assumption that such simply did not take place and then proceed with our own explanation of what happened? Of course, we cannot but make such substitutions of our own understandings when we provide explanations, but we should be fully aware of our presumption in so doing and the risks in such a procedure. To make such a substitution involves the assumption that our own framework, including our background assumptions of what

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48. Hence the approach to history often begins with the disclaimer that “full objectivity is an impossibility,” which is followed by a *however* and then a soft version of the argument. See, for example, McMurrin, “History of Mormonism and Church Authorities,” 33.

can and cannot be the case, our own understanding of the world, is necessarily superior on the decisive issues to that contained within the texts we wish to explain and understand. That might be the case, but unless we are certain that it is, we must move with extreme caution. And caution should be the special mark of one who turns to the texts that have a bearing on the faith of his or her own community.

Naïve notions of historical method have fallen on hard times in the literature in which such things are now being discussed precisely because of an increased awareness of the crucial importance of frameworks, assumptions, and informal and formal preunderstandings in our attempts to get at the past. There simply is no truth about the past that is independent of our own historically situated understanding of things. What understanding of truth does this involve?

### Truth and Remembrance

One might hear in the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, a somewhat different notion of what constitutes the truth about the past than is common in our culture, but one that is perhaps consistent with the prophetic demand for remembrance of a past in which the mighty acts of God mingle with the welter of human acts. Truth in this sense is identified with that which ought not to be forgotten, that which is memorable, that which is worthy of being memorialized and hence remembered.<sup>49</sup>

At the end of the *Republic*, Plato has Socrates give an account of some souls who, having made certain choices, now find it necessary

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49. See the following essays and discussion by Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 261–66; Heidegger, “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth,” in *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Anthology*, ed. William Barrett and Henry D. Aiken (New York: Random House, 1962), 3:251–70; Heidegger, “Aletheia (Heraclitus, Fragment B 16),” in *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David F. Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 102–23; Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volume I: The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David F. Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 171–87; and also Paul Friedländer, “Aletheia: A discussion with Martin Heidegger,” in *Plato: An Introduction*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 221–29. Compare H. D. Rankin, “A — ΑΛΘΕΙΑ in Plato,” *Glotta* 41 (1963): 51–54; John Sallis, *Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1973), 97–106.

to come out from “under Necessity’s throne” and thereby find themselves in a strange place. It is a dry, hot realm, the “plain of Lethe,” which was, we are told, “barren of trees and all that naturally grows on earth.” As darkness approached, in that stifling heat they found it necessary to drink at least in some measure from the river called Lethe. Those who lacked the virtue of “prudence drank more than the measure,” and as they did so they “forgot everything” and eventually lapsed into a deep sleep. When they awoke, they found they had been carried away to a strange land they could not recognize. Presumably, to have drunk just the right measure of forgetfulness, but not an excess, or to have somehow been prevented from drinking at all, would have allowed the recovery of sight in the light of the day. What all this means in the context of that dialogue is difficult to say, but it may help illustrate something like what we are suggesting with remembrance and truth.<sup>50</sup> Even a sip of “Lethe” makes one lethargic. We hear in the word *Lethe* a faint reference to the river of forgetfulness surrounding Hades; what ought to be forgotten slips into that river.

Stories are necessarily controlled by plots, either explicitly or implicitly. Historians must employ some selection principles to fashion the plots that control their narratives. The truth, when understood as the memorable, is that which is worthy of being remembered and hence that which moves to virtuous deeds. What has been memorialized from the past? Certainly not everything. What is truly memorable? What ought to be remembered from the past? Everything? No one could hold that view, and especially not the believer, for he wants God to forget some things and may even long to himself, just as we should also.

Remembering everything is simply impossible because not everything has been recorded or memorialized, and what has been written down is never some neutral description of what happened but is already an interpretation controlled by various assumptions including our own hopes and desires. Even as we invoke the memory of things past, we reinterpret them for our present situation and in the light of

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50. For the language quoted, see *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 303.

our current understanding. Should Latter-day Saints now substitute the conjectures of highly secularized historians whose controlling assumptions do not permit the mighty acts of God in history? Should these push aside the original interpretations of the record keepers, assuming we can interpret them reasonably correctly? Would that be the proper way of preserving or enlarging the memory and hence preserving the identity of the Saints? Or would doing this lead to a radical transformation in the meaning of the message? These are important questions. We cannot avoid taking a position on them. Perhaps the analogy between Jewish and Latter-day Saint memory and the role of history in preserving an identity grounded in memory will assist us in arriving at faith grounded in affirming answers.

In an effort to preserve and enlarge the memory of the Saints, we should strive to draw upon categories found in the sacred texts rather than borrow our controlling assumptions from other sources. History written from within the circle of faith would not make the faithful into paper heroes, nor would it overlook their proclivities for their own kind of “works of darkness.” The story of Mormon things should be told in such a way that the Saints are reminded that the axis ultimately runs between man and God and not between Gentiles and faultless Saints.

