

Appendix 1:

Scripture and History

The prophet Jacob tells us that “all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of [Christ]” (2 Nephi 11:4). What does he mean and how might that help us understand scriptural history? Particularly, how can we understand the scriptures well enough to see that all things do indeed typify the Savior? By better understanding what the ancients thought about the world and its history.

Ancient writers did not see the world the way we see it today. For example, we define an individual as an independent, metaphysically autonomous entity who gains knowledge of the world through power, usually in the form of skills. In contrast, ancient and western medieval writers, including writers of scripture, defined an individual in terms of how he fit into the whole, and his knowledge depended on how well he had learned to live in harmony with that whole. Thus to us Plato’s claim that knowledge is virtue seems nonsensical, but to the ancients—Greek or otherwise¹—it was perfectly reasonable, for they thought that people gained virtue by living in harmony with what is ultimate. What was ultimate varied within cultures as well as from culture to culture and time to time. For example, for Plato the ultimate was “the Good.” For Aristotle it was *ho theos* [Greek characters]. Though the best translation of that word is probably “god,” it was not the God of Judaism and Christianity; rather, it was an immaterial principle toward which all action tended. For medieval Christianity, the ultimate was God. These people and cultures disagreed about the nature of what is ultimate, but they agreed that virtue consists of living in harmony with what is ultimate.

This older view of what is ultimate thoroughly informed ancient and medieval civilization, but it disappeared rather quickly with the coming of modernism in about the early seventeenth century, a relatively recent event in world history. One way to understand the beginnings of the modern world is to see the modern world as, among other things, a result of the inability to understand the god that the apostasy placed at the center of the medieval world view. Unable to understand this god, moderns turned toward the study of this world. Instead of viewing conformity or harmony with God’s world as the test of reality, they viewed conformity with reason as reality’s test. This fundamental change made modern science and the Reformation possible. It brought technology and much of the foundation for modern democracy, but it also pushed Western culture toward making God an inessential element of human understanding. Thus the coming of modernism was a mixed blessing.

Because most of our ideas are products of modernist assumptions about the world² and because the scriptures are mostly written according to assumptions that originated before modernism, the understanding of the world that we take to be obvious (a result of the ideas of modernism) is often incongruent with that of ancient histories, particularly one of the most important histories—the scriptures. To understand ancient histories, we must have some idea of the frame of reference from within which they were written. If we try to understand them from a point of view their writers did not share, we may well misread them.

Ancient historians told the literal truth, but given their view of reality, the literal truth was not what we might think it was. By the word *literal*, they did not mean what we mean. To them, *literally* meant “by the letter.”³ For ancient and medieval writers and readers, the literal truth was not a simple chronological record of the events that occurred. It was not a set of facts that an individual could marshal for whatever purposes. They defined the literal truth as the truth revealed by the scriptural writings. Literal truth showed the order and harmony of the world, how everything fits together: the individual and the cosmos; the past, present, and future; the nations and peoples of the world;

the failings and successes of the forefathers. In sum, for the ancients, the literal truth of history was the story of what history means.

This literal view of history meant that it was not enough just to see the events of the world. One had to understand these events properly, and that understanding required what the ancients called illumination. We might interpret illumination as spiritual insight, but that interpretation runs the risk of being too narrow, for illumination included reason and study as well as the inspiration of the Spirit. Sometimes, especially during the late medieval period, the need to use reason and study to obtain illumination was perverted to mean that only the educated could read scripture. This perversion was one cause of the Protestant Reformation, and it led to an emphasis on the ability of each person to have the Spirit (and to what some Latter-day Saints believe to be an overemphasis among Protestants on the Spirit). However, when we see the problems of the perversion of illumination, it is important that we not throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water. Illumination is the need to combine study, prayer, reason, faith, and the promptings of the Spirit when studying scripture.

For the ancients and medievals, it was impossible to understand history except through illumination. In other words, the meaning of history was not added to history by interpretation; the meaning of history *was* history. From the point of view of ancient and medieval thinkers, there is no way to separate history and the interpretation of history. Although today we distinguish between the literal meaning of history (the bare events) and its figurative meaning (fitting those events into the purposes and plans of God), ancient writers of scripture did not. In fact, they could not make this distinction because in the ancient and medieval understanding of reality, there were no bare events. In the ancient understanding, events are what they are by the way they fit in with the divine. Any attempt to understand them apart from that is a distortion of reality; it omits an essential element.⁴

When we read the scriptures from a mind-set that distinguishes between literal and figurative meanings, we are already in interpretive trouble, whatever our conclusions may be. We are headed in the wrong direction and opening ourselves to misunderstanding. For example, we find it difficult to read scripture without wondering, Is that really the order in which those events occurred? How does this story fit into the other things we know about the events and places of the time? What about those events, places, and people the writer does not mention? Where do they fit in? Our understanding of the world generates these kinds of questions and interests, but because ancient writers did not write according to our understanding, we cannot expect them to answer those questions. In fact, if an ancient scriptural writer were available for a discussion, he may not even understand the questions. At least some of our puzzlement and occasional dissatisfaction with the scriptures comes from this difference between our way of understanding the world and that of the ancients. Our worry about how to harmonize the accounts of the four Gospels may be an example of this puzzlement and dissatisfaction, a result of asking questions generated by an understanding of the world that the writers of the Gospels did not share.

For an ancient writer, what does not reveal the hand of God is, in a very real sense, nonexistent. After all, transitory existence is not much of an existence. Given the ancient worldview, a history that does not reveal divine purpose is not a real history. In addition to the questions we can ask about what we can learn about the Lord and his plans in human history, we can ask questions about the scriptures and the reality that stands behind them, a reality independent of the Lord's plans. Then, having asked those two different kinds of questions, we can compare the answers. Put another way, we believe that we can ask two sorts of questions: questions about the text and questions about the events to which the texts refer. Ancient writers, however, did not ask those two types of questions. They believed that the divine text was a person's only access to the real events because it was their only access to the event at all, including its relation to God. For them, there was nothing to know beyond knowing the way the world and the Lord fit together as revealed in scripture. There was no other version of reality besides the

scriptural version; there was only the reality of scripture. Ancient writers understood only one reality: God's reality, including his understanding and intentions. Therefore, true histories of the world had to tell the full reality, not some part of it. The ancients would think that what we call the literal truth today is only part of the truth and thus insufficient and distorted as an account of reality. They ultimately related the questions that they could reasonably ask about history to the harmony of the human world and the divine world: How is that harmony achieved? How do we see it or its absence in our everyday lives? How do we see it or see its absence in the lives of others? How and what does the past teach us about the present, not just as an exemplum but as a case of exactly the same thing, such as the types and shadows of Christ? Because scriptural writings (the letters and words of scripture) answered those questions, they were considered the literal histories of the world.

With an understanding of this difference between ancient and modern views of history, we can see that while we might believe that ancient writers of scripture were not writing true history, they would have said they were. It just is not history in our sense of the word. (They would almost certainly have felt that our sense of history is anemic.) For them, history was an account of the Divine and the world. Because the world is created by the Divine, its existence and events cannot be separated from divine purposes and plans.⁵ In other words, when understood fully and properly, all events typify or structurally reveal God, particularly the Creator, Jesus Christ. To ancient Christian writers, an accurate history was one that showed that the world typifies Christ.

What are the implications of these differing views of reality for reading and understanding scripture? Until the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, readers of scripture read from the same point of view as the ancient writers of scripture. They read the scriptures as an account of the order of the world, of how history repeats that order in individual lives and events, and of how they can expect to fit into the order of the world. In other words, they viewed the scriptures as an account of how the world typifies its Creator. However, with the loss of the ancient understanding that began in the sixteenth century and was completed before the end of the seventeenth, that understanding of scripture also began to disappear. Seeing the scriptures as divine truth was no longer a natural way of seeing things; it required a shift to an unnatural perspective.⁶

Two responses to this change in worldview began to predominate. First, there was rational biblical criticism, a response that itself had two manifestations. Some people believed that the Bible (and other scripture) told the historical truth about the history of the world (though *historical* no longer meant what it had before); others were less confident that the Bible was historically accurate. They insisted that modern methods for understanding historical documents applied equally to the Bible. In spite of their disagreements, however, these two groups agreed that history is the unbiased written account of an event—we might describe it as what a movie camera would record if it were on the scene. The two groups disagreed only about the accuracy of biblical history. The second response to the change in the understanding of history that occurred with modernism was symbolic interpretation. This approach did not value historical meaning (often claiming that whether the stories are historically true is irrelevant). This response to the scriptures was less common than the first, though not uncommon.

These two ways of understanding scripture (or three, including the division in the first group) remain the most common ways of thinking about scripture among Christians today, including Latter-day Saints. But neither of these approaches is in harmony with the scriptures. Both responses—taking the scriptures literally (or condemning them because they do not fit our view of literal, scientific history) and taking them figuratively—are reactions to an impoverished understanding of the world and the scriptures. Though both responses are often portrayed as intellectual achievements, both are the result of intellectual failure.⁷

At some point, most Christians have had to enter the imbroglio over the historical accuracy of the Bible. Latter-day Saints have also questioned of the historical accuracy of the Book of Mormon and the books of Moses and Abraham, some as critics, others as advocates. Ironically, however, such questions were foreign to the writers of those books and to readers until the last two hundred years—foreign to the point of being unintelligible. If we are to understand the scriptures, we must move beyond the division of literal and figurative. We must learn to think about the world more as the ancients did. In Book of Mormon language, we must learn to see scriptural history in terms of types instead of literal versus figurative.

Finding our way out of modernism and into a more ancient view of history and reality is not easy. Our entire language and culture militate against our doing that, and we cannot simply ignore what time has wrought. But to the extent that we can thus change our frame of reference, we will find the scriptures to be a greater source of comfort, joy, instruction, and doctrine than before. A renaissance of scripture reading and understanding can occur among members of the church, people who, by virtue of the restoration and their commitment to the reality of the scriptures and the divine world found in them, are already perhaps more prepared to make such a change than any other people in the world.

We do not find our way back into the scriptures by reading about ancient history or trying to force ourselves to think about the world differently. We are unlikely to change our mind-set by ourselves. The best way to understand the world from which the scriptures came and within which they make the most sense is to read scripture as it was written to be read. In other words, the best way to get a scriptural understanding of the world and its history is to let the scriptures teach us how to understand the world and its history. The prophets wrote by inspiration, and it seems safe to assume that reading their writings will teach us how to read and understand our world and ourselves better, as long as we do not try to interpret them according to *our* view of the world. This is more difficult to avoid than we might imagine. We cannot decide ahead of time what the scriptures can teach us or what is important in them. Neither can we decide ahead of time that they are sometimes to be taken figuratively or metaphorically and sometimes literally. We need to see how they go beyond that distinction, how—if we insist on using the distinction—they are always both literal and figurative.

Notes

1. Because our intellectual heritage primarily descends from Greek thinking, it is helpful for us to look at this idea in the context of Greek thought, but the idea is also common in ancient near eastern cultures.
2. One writer has described modernism's assumption this way: "A constellation of positions (e.g., a rational demand for unity, certainty, universality, and ultimacy) and beliefs (e.g., the belief that words, ideas, and things are distinct entities; the belief that the world represents a fixed object of analysis separate from forms of human discourse and cognitive representation; the belief that culture is subsequent to nature and that society is subsequent to the individual)" (Steven Daniel, "Paramodern Strategies of Philosophical Historiography," *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 1/1 [1993]: 42–43). There is far too little room here to discuss the point extensively, but suffice it to say that first, few, if any, of these assumptions have remained standing in the twentieth century, and second, the failure of these assumptions does not necessarily imply the failure of their claims to truth or knowledge, as is often argued, sometimes by adherents to the current attack on modernism and sometimes by critics of that attack. For an excellent discussion of postmodernism and its relation to religion, see John Caputo, "The Good News about Alterity: Derrida and Theology," *Faith and Philosophy* 10/4 (October 1993): 453–70.

3. For more about this difference between modern and premodern understandings of history and scripture, see James E. Faulconer, "A New Way of Looking at Scripture," *Sunstone*, August–September 1995, 78–84.

4. For a fuller account of the ancient view and its change to the modern view, see James E. Faulconer and Richard N. Williams, "Reconsidering Psychology," in *Reconsidering Psychology*, ed. James E. Faulconer and Richard N. Williams (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1980) 9–60. For an account of the results of this change in the interpretation of scripture, see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 1–85.

5. That Nephi seems to distinguish between sacred and secular writings in 1 Nephi 9:2–4 may suggest that the view I describe is wrong. However, Nephi does not speak of the two kinds of writings as sacred on the one hand and secular on the other. He says that one account is an account of "the ministry of my people" (verse 3) and the other is "an account of the reign of kings," etc. (verse 4). The view of history I am ascribing to ancient writers does not preclude these two kinds of accounts.

6. Because frontier America was slower to catch on to changes in such things, people there, including the family of Joseph Smith, still retained much of this older view of the world into the nineteenth century. As a result, I think this older view is also essential to understanding the prophecies of the restoration.

In the church today there is still something of this older view (though it is usually disguised as a form of scriptural literalism—in the modern sense of the word *literal*—one of the two alternatives created with the loss of the older worldview). But we are schizophrenic, still holding to this older view while at the same time adopting the methods and attitudes prevalent in our (apostate) culture. We may adopt those methods and attitudes positively—as a standard—or, more commonly, we may adopt them negatively—as an antistandard—but in either case they will govern our understanding of scripture.

7. Of course, this failure is not the failure of history itself. I am not saying that modern history is a failure, and we should not understand the discipline of history as the product of conceptual failure. Rather, the failure comes when we try to read and understand the scriptures as if they were modern histories. It marks a conceptual failure in most of those on both sides of the debate over whether to understand the scriptures literally (in our sense of the term, in other words, as if they were modern histories) or figuratively (from this perspective they are often treated as primitive and, therefore, failed modern histories, and they are generally valued only for their ethical content).