

Of Sacred Records

I have reached the stage where I have nothing more to say. As far as I am concerned the scriptures say it all.

“Great Are the Words of Isaiah,” *CWHN* 1:215

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To the Saints, the sacred record is a source of joy and delight as well as of instruction and guidance. It is a joy to read, a treat to the mind and the spirit, “for my soul delighteth in the scriptures, and my heart pondereth them, and writeth them for the learning and profit of my children” (2 Nephi 4:15).

“A Strange Thing in the Land,” *CWHN* 2:134-35

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President Benson pleads with us to read the scriptures, so we gingerly pick our way through the Book of Mormon, as if we were tiptoeing through a minefield instead of taking each passage to heart. What a trial it must have been for one who had conversed with angels and with the prophets of old to find himself surrounded by a bunch of yahoos who considered themselves very important.

“Criticizing the Brethren,” 15

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If you pray for an angel to visit you, you know what he’ll do if he comes. He’ll just quote the scriptures to you—so you know you’re wasting your time waiting for what we already have. Though you are amused by my saying this, I’m quite serious about it.

“Gifts,” *CWHN* 9:87

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Even when God recognizes extenuating circumstances, he still gives us a choice, with precedence going always to the general rule.

“If There Must Needs Be Offense,” 54

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There is no limit to the acts of depravity that might be justified and sanctified by appeal to specific instances in scripture. It is best to allow no latitude whatever to individual interpretation, with its easy rationalizations and sophistries, as long as we have an abundance of clear and specific statements of just what pleases and displeases our Heavenly Father.

“If There Must Needs Be Offense,” 55

All the scholars are more or less floundering around today in the rising flood of parchments and papyri that has caught everyone by surprise. If we cannot swim or wade in these waters, we can at least venture down to the shore line to see what all the excitement is about.

Preface, note 1, *CWHN* 7:418

When scholars who pride themselves on their freedom from any religious commitment are found seriously considering the genesis of the written word not only in holy writings but specifically in our own scriptures, it behooves us to pay attention. Whoever reads the Standard Works today has before him the words of God to men from the beginning, in witness of which the very letters on the page are but slightly conventionalized forms of the original symbols in which the message was conveyed. . . . As members of the human race we are bound to approach the scriptures with new feelings of reverence and respect. They are the nearest approach and the best clue thus far discovered to the genesis of the written word.

“Genesis of the Written Word,” *CWHN* 12:482

We don’t have a professional clergy—a paid ministry that gives official interpretation of the scriptures—as we’ve always said we don’t. There’s no office in the Church that qualifies the holder to give the official interpretation of the Church. We’re to read the scriptures for ourselves, as guided by the Spirit.

“The Terrible Questions,” *CWHN* 12:336-37

Clergy have always had their favorite themes and passages, about 5 percent of the total, necessarily taken out of context, since the other 95 percent which is overlooked is the context. The scriptures, with modern revelations added, are far more explicit and detailed than most people realize. There are places where they are silent, but how can we know what is missing and what we are missing in them unless we read them all? Within that framework we are free to ponder, speculate, discuss, criticize, check, and control from other sources—it is all perfectly legitimate. Above all, we are not only justified in falling back on the scriptures, but we are obliged to—because there is *no other* framework available to appeal to.

“Breakthroughs I Would Like to See,” *CWHN* 9:378

The book of Isaiah, historically the most important of all to Jews, Christians and Latter-day Saints, should at present be the object of the most intensive possible examination. From the beginning the leaders of the Church understood what that would mean, and Joseph, Brigham, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff and the rest spent all the time they could in the School of the Prophets, in which the principal key to the Scriptures was considered to be the study of ancient biblical and relevant modern languages.

THE BIBLE

Revised and improved editions of the Bible are constantly coming from the press, and the Mormons have never believed in an infallible book or an infallible anything in which men have had a hand. God allows fallible humans to be co-workers with him on the road to a far-distant perfection, but he expects them to make lots of mistakes along the way.

“... There Can Be No More Bible,” *CWHN* 7:4

Students everywhere have been led to the conclusion that the Flood story and the Garden of Eden motifs in ancient records of many people discredit the Bible by showing it to be just another primitive presentation of old myths. What it discredits, however, is their concept of what the Bible should be—a unique, perfect, absolutely complete, flawless source of all knowledge, a thing which the Bible itself never claims for a moment.

“Israel’s Neighbors,” 26

Everybody has seen a garden, and everybody has been in a heavy rainstorm; so it requires no effort of the imagination for a six-year-old to convert concise, straightforward Sunday School recitals into the vivid images that will stay with him for the rest of his life.

These stories have been discredited as nursery tales because in a sense they *are* nursery tales, retaining forever the forms they take in the imaginations of small children, defended by grownups who refuse to distinguish between childlike faith, and thinking as a child when it is, as Paul says, “time to put away childish things.”

It’s equally easy and deceptive to fall into adolescent disillusionment, especially with “emancipated” teachers [who] smile tolerantly at the simple gullibility of bygone days while passing stern moral judgment on the savage old “tribal god” who, overreacting with impetuous violence, wiped out Noah’s neighbors simply for making fun of his boat-building on a fine summer day. The sophisticated say that these so-called myths were tolerable in bygone days but that now it’s time to grow up.

“Enoch the Prophet,” *CWHN* 2:3-4

THE APOCRYPHA

What are the Apocrypha? They are a large body of writings, Jewish and Christian, existing alongside the Bible, each of which has at some time or other been accepted as true revealed scriptures by some Christian or Jewish group.

Where do they come from? The actual manuscripts are as old as our Bible manuscripts and are sometimes written by the same hands, but their contents betray widely scattered sources, some of which are orthodox and some of which are not.

Then why bother about them? Because writers of the Bible respect them and sometimes quote them, thus including excerpts of the Apocrypha in our Bible, while the fathers of the church in the first three centuries accept many of them as genuine and quote them as scripture.

“A New Age of Discovery,” *CWHN* 7:29

Almost every ancient patriarch, prophet, and apostle is credited with having left behind a “testament” or “apocalypse” bearing his name. . . . Some of these stories are very old, and a consistent pattern emerges from the telling of them, though they are widely scattered in space and time.

Briefly summed up, the general plot is this: a righteous man, sorely distressed by the depravity of the world or of Israel, prays fervidly for light and knowledge, and in due time receives a divine manifestation, when a heavenly messenger comes to teach him and takes him on a celestial journey, climaxing in a theophany, after which he returns to earth and reports his experience to family and friends—often this is just before he dies, and he bestows a patriarchal blessing—his testament—upon his sons. Often he also goes forth to preach to the people, who reject his message with scorn, whereupon he departs into the wilderness with his faithful followers to establish a more righteous if tentative order of things in the desert, a sort of “church of anticipation.” All of which things Lehi also does in due and proper order; the first part of Nephi’s writing, he says, is but an abridgment of his father’s record, which may properly be called the Testament or Apocalypse of Lehi.

“The Lachish Letters,” *CWHN* 8:391-92

In 1948 world turned a corner. Overnight, modern Israel became a reality, *and so did ancient Israel*. The Battle Scroll appeared just at the moment that Israel was called to arms, and according to [Yigael] Yadin had not only a moral but even a practical value in that great crisis. Suddenly scriptures became “relevant.”

In the same year the oldest Jewish library and the oldest Christian library were discovered. Both were threatened with destruction. Both were challenged as hoaxes. Both were viewed as the work of irresponsible and fanatical sectaries.

Yet through the years there has been a growing respect for both the Nag Hammadi and the Qumran writings, both because of their impressive spiritual content and the number of other pseudepigrapha that are being discovered or rediscovered to confirm their proximity to the authentic Judaism and Christianity that flourished in the days before the Jewish and Christian doctors of Alexandria changed everything.

“Churches in the Wilderness,” *CWHN* 8:299

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If one makes a sketch of a mountain, what is it? A few lines on a piece of paper. But there is a solid reality behind this poor composition. Even if the tattered scrap is picked up later in a street in Tokyo or a gutter in Madrid, it still attests to the artist’s experience of the mountain as a reality. If the sketch should be copied by others who have never seen the original mountain, it still bears witness to its reality.

So it is with the apocryphal writings. Most of them are pretty poor stuff and all of them are copies of copies. But when we compare them we cannot escape the impression that they have a real model behind them, more faithfully represented in some than in others. All we ever get on this earth, Paul reminds us, is a distorted reflection, but it is a reflection of things that really are. Since we are dealing with derivative evidence only, we are not only justified but required to listen to all the witnesses, no matter how shoddy some of them may be.

“The Expanding Gospel,” *CWHN* 12:203-4

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The *Logia* or Sayings of Jesus found in the early Fathers have suffered unmerited neglect through the years, the result of the thesis that our present Bible contains all there is to know. . . . It is unmerited because all the words of Jesus in the Bible can be read in *half an hour*, though Jesus’ actual sermons often lasted for many hours. What good Christian would be such a fool as to walk out on the Lord while he was speaking?

It is also unwarranted because the purported words of Jesus are found in the church writers of the early period. If such men insist on quoting sayings which they actually believe were uttered by the Master, what greater folly can there be than refusing to give them serious attention? Yet it was not until another great papyrus find in Egypt at the turn of the century that serious attention was given to the *Agrapha* (Unwritten Things of Jesus).

“The Illusive Primitive Church,” *CWHN* 7:65-66

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If the story of Christ’s return after the resurrection were only a myth or wishful thinking, we would find either total silence on the matter or else the usual gnostic-philosophic claptrap masquerading as deep mysteries. Instead of that, we find, if we bring the records together, a remarkably consistent exposition of doctrines heretofore unrecognized by the Christian world.

“... But Unto Them It Is Not Given,” *CWHN* 7:110

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The argument most confidently put forth today for the post-resurrectional activity of Jesus is the behavior of the apostles, who before the resurrection were by all accounts unready not only to preach but even to hear “the things of the kingdom,” and yet presently went forth into the world fully laden. But is it not remarkable that *nothing* has come down to us from that wonderful time when the church is supposed to have received all its knowledge and training? Why have we only the opening words of the Lord’s discourse, declaring how badly the disciples needed the instruction that followed (Luke 24:25-27), of which nothing is preserved in the canon?

“Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum: Forty-Day Mission of Christ,” *CWHN* 4:12

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The Forty-Day documents have four things in common. First of all, they were *secret*—for the apostles only, not for general knowledge. They were not handed down; that is why they could be faked later on. Of course, people knew the sort of thing the Lord taught, and consequently the sort of thing to fake—so everybody pretended to have the knowledge, but nobody did.

Second, they paint a very *gloomy picture*. In all of these accounts, the apostles ask the Lord, “What’s going to happen to us now? What’s going to happen to the church? Why are we going to all this trouble in this dispensation if it’s all going to be taken away?” The Lord tells them, “This is for two generations now; then it’s going to be taken away. A lesser church will be left in its place; it will be kept on the fire, so to speak. The true church will return later when I return with my Father.” This of course was the doctrine the Christians didn’t like. It was very bad news for the later church to have the Lord telling the apostles that all these things were going to be taken away. Yet he had said the same thing several places in the New Testament. The documents made this very clear; thus these teachings were unpopular.

Third, the Lord taught them *strange doctrines*, and the Christian world didn’t like this sort of thing at all. The churches liked spiritual things, the things that came out of the university of Alexandria.

Fourth (the main thing), the Lord gave the apostles the *ordinances*.

“Apocryphal Writings,” *CWHN* 12:297-98

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Silence in the record is not a proof of ignorance or lack of interest by the writers. The holiest things were not meant for general distribution. . . . Those to whom “the mysteries of the Kingdom” have been imparted have always been bound to secrecy, and the more wonderful the information, the more carefully guarded it was. The pearls are not to be thrown about promiscuously. Such things are given *only* to those who ask for them sincerely; the door is open only to those who knock at it. The treasures are found only by those who seek for them.

“Censoring the Joseph Smith Story,” *CWHN* 11:63

THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

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The texts are packed with matter of greatest interest to Latter-day Saints. The people who wrote and hid these records had our own conception of continued revelation, of this life as a probation, of the preexistence and resurrection, of the dispensations of the gospel with falling away and restoration. Their covenants and ordinances closely resemble ours; and their book of doctrine and covenants (now called the Manual of Discipline) is surprisingly like our own, as are their ideas of priesthood, prophecy, heaven and earth, marriage and eternal progeny, etc.

“More Voices from the Dust,” *CWHN* 1:240

With the Dead Sea Scrolls we have something new under the sun. Even if they simply repeated what we already know, their principal contribution would be the same—a new dimension of reality to our religion. It has been a long time since scholars asked, “Are there really such things as this? Did this really happen?” They have learned to be content with the easy assumption that it really makes no difference in dealing with spiritual, allegorical, moral emblems whether or not there is a physical reality to our stories. The most shocking thing that Joseph Smith brought before the world was the announcement that things men had been talking about for centuries were literally true and would have to be viewed as such. The restoration of the gospel brought a new reality but found few believers. It was more comfortable the old way when you could take things just as you wanted them. But with the scrolls from the caves, the reality of things hits us in the face with a shock. How often does it happen that documents thousands of years have been dug up by the very descendants of the people who wrote those documents, who could actually read them on the spot, not referring them to pedantic decipherment in distant studies and laboratories, but reading them right off as messages from their own grandparents?

“Churches in the Wilderness,” *CWHN* 8:297

If there is any validity to the thousands of studies appearing on parallels between the scrolls and various biblical and historical writings, the perfectly staggering parallels between the Book of Mormon and the scrolls cannot be brushed aside nor explained away. Here are a few:

1. . . . The tradition of the sacred buried record meets us full-blown in the similar preservation of the scrolls and the Book of Mormon.
2. . . . The community of Qumran was led into the desert by such a man [as Lehi] centuries later, and there is considerable evidence that his was an established and traditional routine of great antiquity.
3. . . . We find the Qumran people offering animal sacrifice and observing the Law of Moses under the direction of legitimate priests, and yet at the same time observing ordinances of a strangely Christian nature. . . . [A] counterpart is found in the Book of Mormon.
4. The Qumran people denounce the Jews at Jerusalem for their corruption and laxity in observing the Law. . . . This is exactly the attitude of Nephi.
5. They keep the Law of Moses but in everything *anticipate* the coming of the Messiah and the new covenant. . . . This parallels the Book of Mormon situation exactly.

6. They see a peculiar significance in going out into the wilderness and in choosing site where they can establish a large and elaborate system of tanks and basins for washings and baptisms. One thinks immediately of Alma's community in the wilderness at the Waters of Mormon.

7. . . . They were organized into a general congregation with a council of twelve laymen headed by three priests. . . .

8. Some scholars believe that the greatest single revelation of the scrolls is the . . . mysterious "Teacher of Righteousness" or "Righteous Teacher," a major prophet whose very existence was unknown until 1950. . . . He was of priestly descent, being of the line of Zadok, another mysterious prophet, whom some believed lived at the time of Moses and who is the type of the true priest who looked forward to the Messiah. . . . The important thing is the discovery not of controversial individuals but an undeniable tradition of a line of persecuted Messianic prophets. This is in perfect agreement with the Zenock and Zenos tradition in the Book of Mormon. . . .

9. For the first time we now learn of the ancient Jewish background of (1) the theological language of the New Testament and Christian apocrypha, (2) their eschatological doctrines, and (3) their organizational and liturgical institutions. . . . All three receive their fullest exposition in 3 Nephi.

"The Dead Sea Scrolls," *CWHN* 1:248-50

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The whole theme of religion is eternal life. But beings who would live forever must be prepared to do so—they must be perfect. Nothing but perfection will do for an order of existence that is to last forever and ever. The striving for perfection is the theme of the Manual of Discipline. The sectaries of Qumran knew that the greatest of all prizes was not to be cheaply bought, that there could be no cheating or cutting of corners; to prepare for eternity, one must be willing to go all the way.

Whatever may have been their human failings, these people, as the Roman Catholic scholar Georg Molin observed, must be taken seriously and viewed with great respect. The proper title for them, the name they gave themselves, he maintains, is "Latter-day Saints"—and he deplores the preemption of that name at the present time by a "so-called Christian sect."

Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 255