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Reduction and Enlargement: Harold Bloom’s Mormons

Reviewed by Alan Goff

While Mormon women didn’t exactly “break the vessels”1 to build the Kirtland temple, as tradition relates, they did donate china and glassware to be ground as decoration in the stucco. Rather than Harold Bloom’s flamboyant breaking of the vessels as an appropriate trope for his revisionary enterprise, the grinding of china is more appropriate for the complex mixture of work, knowledge, and ornamentation that is Mormonism. It also measures the chasm between Bloom and an adequate understanding of Mormonism: for Bloom himself claims that “only religion can study religion” (p. 36), and although Bloom takes his “religious criticism,” parallel to literary criticism in that both operate on the products of the imagination, to be adequate to the task, Bloom’s “gnosticism” blinds him to anything that isn’t gnosis. Bloom sees only the glistening of the ground china in the wall without seeing the functional stucco exterior.

Bloom, who analyzed poetic influence in Romantic poets, has produced recent studies retrojecting his revisionary project onto the so-called J Pentateuchal writer, onto the gospel of John, and plans more on Freud and Shakespeare. As Bloom now calls himself a religious critic, attempting to establish a new discipline—“religious criticism”—Bloom’s study of Mormonism requires close examination (Bloom discusses other denominations, the analyses of which I won’t address).

Believers in the Restoration have no small experience with those who project Mormonism and its scriptures as the products of Joseph Smith’s imagination; in some ways Bloom’s project isn’t new. However, Bloom’s tremendous respect for Joseph Smith is novel. Bloom believes in the cult of genius; great minds make history and great poetry. Bloom accords Joseph Smith the

highest status as an imaginative genius (p. 95). Bloom’s discussion of Mormonism is often acute and penetrating. Space won’t allow me to dwell on what Bloom does well, but I was surprised by Bloom’s often insightful analysis of the Mormon tradition.

Bloom is dissatisfied with sociological, anthropological, psychological, and historical approaches to religion (pp. 22, 29, 36), justifiably so because they tend to reduce religion to less than it is. This is particularly true of such explanations of Mormonism, which isolate features within their explanatory range and ignore or dismiss those beyond it. Bloom offers his religious criticism instead, which focuses on imaginative religious elements, for “all religion is a kind of spilled poetry” (p. 80); like poetry, “religion is a culmination of the growing inner self, but religion is the poetry, not the opiate, of the masses” (p. 36). Having allied his literary criticism with marginal religious traditions (kabbalah and gnosticism), Bloom selects the Latter-day Saints, another outsider tradition, as the greatest embodiment of the American religious imagination. If literary criticism also deals with the products of the imagination, this seems like a natural place for a literary critic to begin being a religious critic. But Bloom fails to support his preference for reducing religion to the imagination over history’s reduction of religion to the cultural environment or sociology’s reduction of religion to empirically measurable adjuncts. Perhaps he feels the reasons are self-evident. They aren’t.

Although Bloom disclaims being “particularly exercised by politics” (p. 94), his book is social criticism. Obsessed with politics, Bloom habitually characterizes those who disagree with his politics as dangerous fanatics; so Bloom calls Baptists and Mormons a “dangerously strong coalition of American Religionists that now guarantee the continued ascendancy of the Reagan-Bush dynasty” (p. 269). More pernicious is Bloom’s op-ed column in the New York Times;2 promoting the book, it updates the last few pages, identifying Mormons with a combination imperiling American liberties.

Bloom’s description of the Mormon conflict with American culture characterizes the past, giving way to a crash program of being ultra mainstream by becoming Reagan-Bush, ultra-conservative Republicans (p. 88). The stroke is too broad here; I took the book into church and asked others if Bloom’s

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2 Sunday, 26 April 1992, 19.
stereotypes applied to them; few agreed. After the L.A. riots I provoked discussions with ward members and their political positions were far removed from Bloom’s characterizations. But I live in New York (this is another sign of Bloom’s inadequacy since his position doesn’t account for regional factors). But even in the West, Bloom should have seen that this scapegoating of religious minorities as powerful and dangerous is too simplistic to be adequate. Utah’s congressional delegation is comprised of two Democratic representatives, one Republican representative, and two Republican senators (a forty-percent Democratic representation). Eastern Idaho, predominantly Latter-day Saint, had (at the book’s publication date) a Democratic congressman.

Bloom claims not only that Mormons have taken over the CIA and the FBI, but that we have a larger plan—we are a cabal: “There is the broad change in Mormon strategy, now ongoing for about sixty years, in which the Saints rival Fundamentalist Baptists and other American Evangelicals in having become socially, politically, and economically reactionary bastions of the American establishment. Mormons have extended their missionary work from the American public and foreign nations to our federal government, so that the FBI, CIA, and allied organizations have become very Mormon indeed” (p. 118). What’s the next step? The stereotype that Mormons are taking over the international banking system? These claims simply don’t account for the complexity of Mormon relations with the larger American society. This attack on Mormons for exercising their democratic rights is becoming too familiar; Kenneth Winn recently explained how Missourians and Illinoians were merely being good republicans and were otherwise justified in murdering and expelling Mormons, for the Saints tended to vote en bloc and otherwise meddle in local politics.³

So while respecting Mormonism, Bloom has “a healthy fear of its immense future” (p. 86). We are like the Japanese, “deferring the imperial dream in favor of economic triumph” (p. 97). While I doubt that the skinheads who paint swastikas on the Mormon temple in Boise read Bloom, memory points to similar characterizations made about Mormons in Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and Utah. Such broad generalizations about undue Mormon influence in the FBI and CIA require substantiation.

My guess is that they originated in unsubstantiated accusations that were part of a dismissed case against the FBI. Bloom claims that we Mormons, "if [we] are at all faithful to the most crucial teachings of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, no more believe in American democracy than [we] do in historical Christianity or in Western monogamy. Smith, Young, and their followers believed in theocracy" (p. 91). This simplistic political analysis of Mormonism shouldn't be taken seriously.

Yet in a way Bloom is right about the all too human tendency of Mormons to be assimilated to American culture. Many consider Marxism to be a most powerful critique of capitalism. But Joseph Smith and Brigham Young critiqued American greed and corruption more cogently. Bloom says contemporary Mormons have "fallen away" from the teachings of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young (pp. 86, 111); if Mormons have committed themselves to the ideal of economic triumph, then they have indeed apostatized. Joseph and Brigham anticipated the contemporary Girardian and Levinasian insight that the capitalist economy is large-scale and disguised violence against people and nature. Bloom doesn't see that Joseph and Brigham's teaching lives today; he seems unaware of Hugh Nibley's or Eugene England's social criticism. The latter claim the Latter-day Saints have adopted the American ethos of patriotism and greed and that when Moroni announced to Joseph that all had gone astray, that meant not only religious, but also economic, philosophical, political, and legal institutions. This is what Joseph and Brigham said about the saints in their own time, that they too easily adopted American greed; if the saints have always too willingly compromised with the world of evil dressed in business suits, it is no more prevalent today than in it was in Joseph's time. Today, while many Mormons have adopted the business ethos of the larger culture, the prophetic warning against attempting to live both in the suburbs of Zion and within commuting distance of Babylon continues also.

Bloom's most serious deficiency is his failure to read the Book of Mormon adequately or seriously. Bloom has labeled the book unreadable.4 He couldn't be more wrong than when he

4 Bloom insults the New Testament as much as he does the Book of Mormon: "As for the relevance of the aesthetic to the issue of the conflict between sacred texts, I doubt finally that much else is relevant to a strong reader who is not dominated by extraliterary persuasions or convictions. Reading The Book of Mormon, for instance, is a difficult aesthetic experience and I would grant that not much in the New Testament subjects me to
says, "I cannot recommend that the book be read either fully or closely, because it scarcely sustains such reading. Summaries of it are easily available" (p. 86). Ironically, Bloom has spent his life making distinctions between strong and weak readers. I charge him with being a weak reader of the Book of Mormon; nobody appreciates the irony of my charge against one of the world's most distinguished literary critics more than I, but the book rewards the closest readings.

Bloom dismisses the Book of Mormon, claiming it isn't central to Mormons and that when Ezra Taft Benson dies the church will go back to ignoring it (pp. 82–83); actually, the opposite is true. Awkwardly and unconvincingly, Bloom dismisses the Book of Mormon, claiming that the current emphasis on it among Mormons is a temporary blip.

Bloom claims that the Book of Mormon only rises to the level of bravura (rather than, say, audacity—which for Bloom would be a compliment) and is "wholly tendentious and frequently tedious" (p. 85). I know of no text, other than the Bible, that so consistently rewards close reading as the Book of Mormon does. Bloom had an opportunity to demonstrate what a strong reader can do with an underappreciated text, but he wastes the chance.

I feel uncomfortable making such an unsupported charge, so I'll provide a short example of an adequate reading. Bloom's book about the Bible should have prepared him to read the Book of Mormon, for the latter cannot be understood without an intimate knowledge of biblical narrative. Robert Alter recently pointed to "the paramount importance of intrabiblical allusion for ancient Hebrew writers," which holds true for the Book of Mormon. But if you dismiss a priori the possibility that it was written by ancient Hebrews, you will not read the Book of Rigors of quite that range. But then John and Paul do not ask to be read against The Book of Mormon"; Harold Bloom, "'Before Moses Was, I Am': The Original and the Belated Testaments," Notebook in Cultural Analysis 1 (1984): 13. I know how Bloom feels; I get this same feeling when I read Bloom on Romantic poetry.

5 The Book of Mormon is so intimately connected to biblical narrative practices in general and specific Bible narratives in particular that it would have provided a classic case of the principle of predecession which Bloom has spent his life exploring.

Mormon in light of a biblical hermeneutic. Here’s an example that demonstrates the importance of allusion for the Bible and the Book of Mormon, that begins the process of demonstrating the book’s complexity. Soon I will edit a collection of essays dealing with Book of Mormon literary qualities, to which I invite Bloom to submit.

Since Bloom provides no reading of the Book of Mormon, not even a weak misreading, I begin from someone Bloom calls one of “only a handful or two of Mormons, past or present, [who] have been authentic religious critics of their own faith” (p. 80). Fawn Brodie accuses Joseph Smith of plagiarizing from the Bible:

Many stories he borrowed from the Bible. The daughter of Jared, like Salome, danced before a king and a decapitation followed. Aminadi, like Daniel, deciphered handwriting on a wall, and Alma was converted after the exact fashion of St. Paul. The daughters of the Lamanites were abducted like the dancing daughters of Shiloh; and Ammon, the American counterpart of David, for want of a Goliath slew six sheep-rustlers with his sling.7

No weaker a misreading could be given than this, despite the persuasiveness of these claims to the literarily and biblically uninformed. Brodie accuses Smith of snitching from the Bible, no credit given, by stealing the Goliath story. But examine the Goliath story. Nothing should be more apparent to Bloom—the expositor of literary influence—than allusion and “transumption” (the attempt to overcome the weight of tradition by using allusion); the Book of Mormon yields nothing to the Bible in its transumptive stance, but neither Brodie nor Bloom are reading the Book of Mormon under the influence. A recent magazine stated the case as critics such as Brodie quite commonly put it: “Detractors through the years have dismissed Smith’s story as religious fantasy and the book itself as a clumsy reworking of the King James Version of the Bible.”8 This claim is quite true, but doesn’t tell you that it takes a clumsy reader to come up with such a clumsy reading. Let’s first examine this Goliath Brodie claims Joseph Smith snitched from.

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If Alter is right and a primary characteristic of biblical narrative is extensive allusion, then we would expect the Goliath story to be connected to other biblical narratives. We wouldn’t call this relationship “plagiarism”: we would call it sophisticated literary influence. When the Bible “borrows” from other stories within its corpus, such a practice increases our appreciation for the text. The Goliath narrative is allusive.

This story is closely related to the Nabal story. David and Goliath need no introductions, but Nabal is less well known (1 Samuel 25). David, pursued by Saul, asks provisions of Nabal. Nabal dismisses David and his warriors as escaped slaves. In anger David vows to kill Nabal. But Abigail, Nabal’s wife, secretly packs provisions. She excuses her husband, calling him a fool (the Hebrew nāḇāl means “fool,” or “churlish fool”), abating David’s anger. Abigail says, “Yet a man has risen to pursue thee, and to seek thy soul: but the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of life with the Lord thy God; and the souls of thine enemies, them shall he slang out, as out of the middle of a sling” (1 Samuel 25:29).9 Nabal gets drunk that night and in the morning Abigail tells him what she has done, whereupon Nabal has a fit and dies. This reminds us of David’s confrontation with Goliath, for when Nabal hears of Abigail’s actions the next morning he is struck and soon “his heart died within

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9 Of the connection between Nabal and Goliath and that between Nabal and Saul that this quotation conjures up, Gunn says: “The metaphor is complex but the final image of the sling brings clearly to mind the fate of David’s first enemy, Goliath. Lest there be any doubt about the referent of the curse here the language dispels it: for it is quintessentially Saul who has ‘pursued’ (rdp) David and ‘sought his life’ (bqs nps). Thus one of the important functions of Abigail’s speech in the context of the story as a whole, is to foreshadow Saul’s death; David M. Gunn, The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980), 100. Nabal’s death typologically figures Saul’s death. Polzin makes the same connection between Nabal and Goliath and the term “sling.” Robert Polzin, Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, Part 2: 1 Samuel (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 211–12: “When Abigail invokes the image of God sling ing out the life of David’s enemies as from the hollow of a sling (25:29), an allusion to David’s miraculous defeat of Goliath in chapter 17 is hard to avoid. When we read there that David ‘put his hand in his bag and took out a stone and slang it’ (17:49), and then read here that Abigail’s news caused Nabal to become as a stone (25:37), the allusive circle is complete: David’s enemy has been slang out like a stone from his sling, an allusion to David’s victory over Saul as much as over Goliath.”
him, and he became *as a stone* (1 Samuel 25:37), thus giving
us an allusion to the sling and stone of the Goliath story. When
David hears of Nabul’s death he credits the Lord with having
saved him from “reproach/disgrace” (*cherpāh*) another echo of
the Goliath story, because when David killed Goliath, he “took
away the reproach (*cherpāh*) from Israel.”

David then marries Abigail.

In the Goliath narrative, David is favorably portrayed
because he relies on the Lord for deliverance. But in the Nabul
story David is portrayed less heroically as he surrenders to his
rage. Earlier David had turned down Saul’s armor and relied on
the Lord. The Nabul story is sandwiched between the two sto-
ries of David’s sparing Saul’s life while the latter is hunting
David, two stories also connected to Saul’s clothing. So Nabul
is a figure of the ungrateful king who fails to reward a servant;
Nabul is Saul’s “alter ego”; both are ungrateful for David’s
service.

In fact, other keywords connect the Saul stories on
either side of the Nabul story with the Saul stories, including
the Goliath narrative.

While the Nabul story has its own integrity, it has strong
allusive qualities connecting it to the Goliath and Saul narratives.
But the allusive connections between the Nabul, Saul, and

10 Peter D. Miscall, *1 Samuel: A Literary Reading* (Bloomington:

11 The Nabul “story is flanked by traditionary doublets (I Sam. 24
and 26) that have certain points in common with it. Both bodies of material
are concerned with the problem of military self-help. Both make use of the
Leitwörter ‘good’ (*tov*) and ‘evil’ (*ra*). Both show David stopping just short
of acting on his own behalf, an option that would have harmed his welfare
and name, and awaiting vindication from without, by the hand of YHWH.
Yet in another respect the two bodies of material seem diametrically op-
posed: the doublets show David teaching the restraint of the saintly: the
Nabul/Abigail episode shows David being taught such restraint by the inter-
vention of a sagacious woman. I Sam. 24–26 thus form a kind of tradi-
tionary garland, most analogous perhaps to that of Gen. 15–17”; Joel
Rosenberg, *King and King: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible*

12 Robert P. Gordon, “David’s Rise and Samuel’s Demise:

13 Moshe Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of
Comparative Structures, Analogies, and Parallels* (Ramat-Gan, Israel:
Revvim, 1985), 129.

14 I can only allude to the large literature that connects Saul to
Nabal. Another opportunity will allow me such development.
Goliath narratives aren’t the only allusions we need to notice to make sense of the stories. Spell Nabal’s name backward and you get Laban: “The Sages noted the analogy between the two: ‘Rabbi Simon said, “Nabal is Laban—just as Laban was a swindler, so was Nabal a swindler” ’ (Yalqut Sim’oni on 1 Samuel 25, #134). We shall now look at the system of relationships and linkages which help to establish the schematic equation of Saul + Nabal = Laban.”

Nabal’s lack of gratitude makes him a figure of King Saul. Garsiel then points out that as Laban promised his daughter’s hand to Jacob and reneged on that promise without involving the other daughter, Saul promised his eldest daughter, Merab, to the champion who killed Goliath but reneged and later substituted the younger daughter, Michal.16 Nabal is analogous because, just as Jacob guards Laban’s sheep, David guards Nabal’s sheep. Just as Michal helps David against her father and Rachel assists Jacob against her father, Abigail also helps David against Nabal.17

The story of Jacob versus Laban requires more extensive literary analysis. It contains what Alter calls “a betrothal type-scene.” Alter notes the betrothal type-scene structure: (1) in a foreign land (2) the exile meets a nubile maiden, (3) water is drawn, (4) the maiden rushes to announce arrival, and (5) the man is invited to a meal and marriage negotiations.18 Moses’ betrothal at the well is the simplest and most explicit of these Pentateuchal type-scenes (Exodus 2). The betrothal type-scene occurs three times in the Pentateuch (Genesis 24, Genesis 29, and Exodus 2), but also shows up in later biblical narrative.19 Ruth, Boaz, David, and Saul are all involved in betrothal type-scenes.

The David betrothal type-scene requires more exploration. David is too violent a character for such pastoral stories.20 Alter points to the peaceful nature of the Jacob type-scene; Jacob marries and carries out his life while tending Laban’s sheep, “against a background of pastoral activity, with close attention to the economics and ethics of sheep and cattle herding.”21 So,

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16 Ibid., 131.
17 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 58–62.
20 Ibid., 61.
21 Ibid., 55.
too, is David's early career enacted against a pastoral backdrop. David leaves his sheep to kill Goliath, to take up the sword. Three of David's marriages are enacted through violence rather than negotiation. Later in life while at war David yearns for water from a well in Bethlehem, now being held by the Philistines. Three of his warriors break through the lines and retrieve the water. David pours it out, saying it imperiled his men's lives (2 Samuel 23). "Some of the elements of Alter's betrothal type-scene are present: 'drawing water from a well' and 'giving water to drink.' There is a marked inversion since the well is at Bethlehem, David's home town, and not a foreign city."22 Even included in the David story, the wooing type-scene is a story of violence and death.

Once prepared for the allusive quality of biblical narrative, we are ready to examine the allusive quality of Book of Mormon narrative. The question is: does Joseph Smith use the Goliath story to crib in a mechanical way the Ammon story, as Brodie claims?

Paralleling the elements of the "betrothal-type scene, Ammon (1) goes to a foreign land to preach. Bound before the king who asks his intentions, Ammon answers: "I desire to dwell among this people for a time; yea, and perhaps until the day I die" (Alma 17:23). Pleased with this response, (5) Lamoni offers betrothal (2) to one of his nubile daughters: "he would that Ammon should take one his daughters to wife" (Alma 17:24). Ammon declines and becomes a shepherd instead. Absent a well, there is (3) a watering hole for the sheep (Alma 17:26) where the flocks are scattered by thieves. As Moses challenges the rogue shepherds at the well, Ammon defends the flock. As David uses both sling and sword in the Goliath story, Ammon uses a sling to kill six thieves and a sword to disarm others. But only the leader he kills with the sword. The servants carry the severed arms back to Lamoni, as (p. 4) testimony of Ammon's mighty deed (Alma 17:39).

Now that it becomes evident that Book of Mormon critics have "brodied" another of their analyses of the text by taking the story to be as superficial as their own reading, we must look more closely at the story of Ammon at the waters of Sebus. Unlike David, who takes up sling and sword in order to become king, Ammon preaches to the Lamanites instead of accepting the kingship proffered by his own father. A royal son, Ammon is

22 Ibid., 90.
the man who wouldn’t be king. Born a country boy, David’s ambition drives him to become king, resorting to any means necessary. Ammon, the shepherd, refuses the worldly ambitions that are the consuming passions of David’s life, who puts down his staff to take up the sword. Ammon also refuses the marriage that would make him the king’s son-in-law; David accomplishes two bloody feats in order to become the royal son-in-law. The Ammon story is a “narrative analogy” for the David story and is clearly intended as such in the text—you are supposed to see the connection between the Ammon story and the Goliath narrative and if you think the connection is one of plagiarism you just don’t understand biblical narrative. Saul promises his eldest daughter, Michal, to whoever will kill Goliath; Saul reneges on that promise but in attempting to get David killed, he promises his daughter Michal if David undertakes a dangerous mission (1 Samuel 18:20–21). But the ploy doesn’t work; David and his men bring back 200 foreskins of the Philistines rather than the 100 required by Saul. Lamoni, like Saul, intentionally sends Ammon to die violently by making him a shepherd, but also like David, Ammon survives. “Ammon became a servant to king Lamoni. And it came to pass that he was set among other servants to watch the flocks of Lamoni, according to the custom of the Lamanites” (Alma 17:25). The other Lamanite custom follows from the first: “Now it was the practice of these Lamanites to stand by the waters of Sebus to scatter the flock of the people, that thereby they might drive away many that were scattered unto their own land, it being a practice of plunder among them” (Alma 18:7). This explains Lamoni’s response when he hears of

23 “Narrative analogy” may require explanation. More sophisticated than modern texts which characterize by telling us directly about moral strengths or deficiencies, “Hebrew narrative is much more subtle than that, using a wide range of narrative techniques to perform the functions of the explicit commentaries in more transparent narrative types. Prominent among these techniques is that of narrative analogy. Narrative analogy is a device whereby the narrator can provide an internal commentary on the action which he is describing, usually by means of cross-reference to an earlier action or speech. Thus narratives are made to interact in ways which may not be immediately apparent; ironic parallelism abounds wherever this technique is applied”; Gordon, “David’s Rise and Saul’s Demise,” 42–43.

24 Hugh Nibley relates this to deadly sports in which the participants are killed; The Prophetic Book of Mormon, vol. 8 in The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989), 539–42.
Ammon’s exploits: he fears it is the Great Spirit punishing them “because of their murders” (Alma 18:2); the king is as guilty as the thieves, for the thieves have no fear of appearing in the palace (Alma 19:21–22).

I should like to develop further the narrative relationships between these networks of stories, but must finish. The Ammon story is truly hidden from weak readers. We do, though, owe Brodie a debt for pointing to the narrative parallels that connect the Ammon story to the Goliath story, but she has characteristically missed the point of the connection. Weak readers simply pass over the story with comments about plagiarism. For now, critics of the Book of Mormon are left with a strange and uncomfortable explanation to make: how did Joseph Smith, if he is truly the author of the Book of Mormon, read the Bible in ways infinitely superior to his critics? The need to dismiss the Book of Mormon as a shallow text becomes an ideological necessity among Book of Mormon revisionists in order to escape this question.

But at least on this point Bloom is ahead of critics, religious or ideological. He grants that Joseph Smith is an astute reader of the Bible. Of the Wentworth letter, Bloom says that “Smith’s insight could have come only from a remarkably apt reading of the Bible, and there I would locate the secret of his religious genius. He was anything but a great writer, but he was a great reader, or creative misreader, of the Bible” (p. 84). But the Bible and Book of Mormon are inextricable, if you understand the latter. Mormon claims that “this [Book of Mormon] is written for the intent that ye may believe that [the Bible]; and if ye believe that ye will believe this also” (Mormon 7:9). I have read the Bible to understand the Book of Mormon; I anticipate a time when the roles will be reversed. While Bloom is right about Joseph Smith and the Bible, he needs somehow to account for the Prophet’s being a better reader of the Bible than Bloom himself is. A summary of the Book of Mormon would never do. It would miss all the nuances, wouldn’t even bother to note the Ammon story. If the Ammon story were an isolated incident of allusion, then Bloom’s scorn for the Book of Mormon might be merited. But the transumptive stance illustrated in the Ammon narrative is repeated constantly throughout the first half of the book. Bloom’s inadequate weak reading of the Book of Mormon is merely a synecdoche of his too simplistic reading of Mormon history, theology, and politics.
We should admire Bloom’s frequently insightful comments on Mormonism. We can be grateful that others have noted the achievements of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. We can also say that Bloom hasn’t gone far enough. Bloom fails in reading the Book of Mormon; although he prides himself on being a revisionist, he is a tragically conventional reader when reading the central text of Mormonism. Bloom should go further, should accept the extraliterary concerns he has rejected, or accept that they might exist even if they are beyond the range of his experience, or accept that they might be enabling devices for strong readers and their absence disabling devices for weak readers. Bloom is hypnotized by gnosis—knowledge—and doesn’t notice that the Latter-day Saints haven’t gone about to build gnosis, but to build a house: of prayer, of fasting, of faith, of learning, of glory, of order—a house of God. Bloom thinks that because he is a gnostic, everyone else must be also. The house Joseph began and the one we Latter-day Saints should be continuing construction on isn’t simply a house of learning (although it is certainly that), but a more complete house than the one sparkling in the evening light with the breaking of the ground vessels.