Scholarship and the Future of The Book of Mormon

Mark Thomas

I've always enjoyed reading Shakespeare. In my undergraduate days at the University of Utah, I attended all three classes offered on the works of the Bard. An enormous body of scholarship has supplemented his works. Open almost any printed work of Shakespeare and accompanying it will be a historical introduction, literary interpretation, and footnotes discussing the meaning of obsolete word usages and variant textual readings. This huge body of scholarship has made Shakespeare accessible. It has bridged the gap of hundreds of years, and we hear his voice from the dust. This cluster of scholarship should serve as a model for the Book of Mormon scholar.

Obviously, the Book of Mormon differs from the plays and other works of Shakespeare. Yet the Book of Mormon shares certain features with every sacred and profane work: historical setting must have influenced its writing; its text has developed; it contains nouns, verbs, symbols, and a wide variety of literary forms. For these reasons, the principles used to interpret the Book of Mormon should be no different from the principles used to interpret any book. And biblical scholarship during the past two centuries has clearly shown how basic interpretive principles can greatly enrich our understanding of, and appreciation for, sacred texts.

Someone once claimed that communication in America is a competitive sport—the first person to draw a breath is declared the listener. We are wonderful speakers, and yet we do not know how to listen carefully. That merely compounds the problem of communication. It is already far too easy to misunderstand even those we know best. Given the enormous cultural and subtle linguistic differences which stand between our present edition of the Book of Mormon and the current twentieth century reader, misinterpretation is bound to follow. The very plainness with which the Book of Mormon wishes to address us becomes a stumbling block in an age that values ambiguity and subtlety. "We have looked so long at foggy landscapes reflected in misty mirrors that we come to like fog." For the Book of Mormon everything is either black or white. For us, nothing is black or white. This is just one example of the wide gulf separating the Book of Mormon from our age. It is the role of scholarship to detect these hidden meanings and assumptions and let the estranged parties communicate. And with Shakespearan and biblical scholarship as models, the effort will be worth it.

The world view reflected in the Book of Mormon is fundamentally different from the world view held by most of its current readers. When scholarship can help us see that world view, because it is so fundamentally different from the view held by most of its current readers, it will certainly challenge our unnoticed assumptions about life. If we let it, scholarship can help us listen to the Book of Mormon for the first time in its own "language." And under its beggar rags we will find a wizard. We are not dealing with a work that only broadens our view or charms our sense of the aesthetic. No, we are dealing with a work of encyclopedic form, a work of bombastic aspiration and revolutionary intent. It portrays itself as the spiritual answer, the instigator of a latter-day reformation which will convert Jew and Indian, and warn Gentile from apocalyptic catastrophe. Its intentions are many; its ambition is boundless. The light of this book, for some reason, blinds a certain number of its readers. Even today, I hear stories of people losing sleep and missing meals while the book works its visionary wonders. And yet even these readers, who seem to bridge the gulf, misinterpret the intent of certain passages. For these reasons, the future of the Book of Mormon lies, to a de-
gree, in the future of scholarship. First let us examine past scholarly approaches to the Book of Mormon and thus find where future scholarship may lead us.

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Textual Criticism

Before we can ever think of interpreting any work, we must first obtain the best possible text. Any student of the parables of Jesus must be first and foremost a textual critic of the New Testament. Anyone seriously interested in understanding the dialogues of Plato must be thoroughly aware of their textual history before he can begin.

Most research on the Book of Mormon text focuses on the early nineteenth century manuscripts. There are still important textual issues that need to be addressed, but we can arrive at a fairly good text. The first set of textual problems came about as the scribes transcribed what Joseph Smith spoke. For example, there are several incorrect homonyms ("rite" for "right" and "Son" for "Sun") in the original manuscript. Later, Oliver Cowdery copied the original manuscript and (for the most part) the printer in Palmyra used this copy for the 1830 edition. When Oliver made this copy, he corrected some grammatical errors, made some copying errors, and in a few spots actually changed or added words to clarify meaning. An example of a problem caused by miscopying can be seen in the story of Korihor. Korihor is struck dumb and makes his confession. He says that he knows that only the power of God could have caused this curse; "yea & I always Knew that there was a God" (original manuscript). Later, Oliver Cowdery mistakenly wrote "also" in the place of "always." This change gives the impression that Korihor once knew that there was a God but ceased believing in him. But the original manuscript helps us understand that Korihor was deliberately deceiving people. Unfortunately, this error has never been corrected in the Utah editions.

Neither the original manuscript nor the printer's copy were punctuated. The punctuation and paragraphing were added by the printer in the 1830 edition. Joseph Smith made changes in the 1837 and 1840 editions to correct mistakes and, in some instances, to expand or clarify a thought. Other less significant changes have been made in subsequent editions. The original and printer's manuscripts contain better readings in several hundred passages than our present Utah edition. But only a handful of these changes have doctrinal significance.

By tracing the history of the text, we discover two basic types of change. The first type can be called "static" change. These changes include accidental scribal mistakes, printer errors, corrections of bad grammar, and modifications that clarify original authorial intent. The copy error in the Korihor story is an example. The vast majority of textual changes have been this first type.

The second type or "prophetic" change, rather than preserving a static text, allows the text to be modified to reflect expanding theological insight. It is interesting to note that a similar prophetic interpretive method shaped early Christian texts. One example can be found in I Nephi 15:35. Both handwritten texts and the 1830 edition state here that Satan is the "preparator" of hell. In reworking the text for the 1837 edition, Joseph Smith first changed "preparator" to "father" in the manuscript. He then crossed out "father" and wrote "foundation." "Foundation" is a symbol that implies a more permanent and powerful relationship between evil and Satan. Another example can be found in I Nephi 13:40. In 1837 the phrase "the lamb of God is the eternal father" was expanded to read, "the lamb of God is the son of the eternal Father." Early Mormonism was trinitarian (probably modal trinitarian). But by the mid 1830s the Church had come to believe that God and Christ were separate beings. This 1837 alteration reflects the changing theology.

This prophetic spirit was "editorially formulated with no particular reference to any... revelatory experience." The transmission of Church history and the development of the Doctrine and Covenants reveals this same prophetic tendency. The conflict between static and prophetic texts is caused by a fundamental tension in Mormonism. The early Church believed that the gospel was a static fulness and that new revelation merely stacked revelatory blocks on past blocks (either teaching new principles or delivering specific instructions). That is how revelation was perceived. But the revelations were in fact organic—doctrines changing as new revelation came. It is this tension between the perceived and actual nature of early Church revelation that caused this textual conflict. This tension is what has made Mormon history and early Mormon texts so interesting, and it still exists in the Church today.

These two types of change, the static and the prophetic, reveal the basic elements of interpretive theory. One is an attempt at an objective text; the other is an attempt to make the text pertinent to the present. Both of these elements are necessary for good interpretation.

Historical Criticism

Once we establish the text to be interpreted, the next step is to reach a historical understanding of the text. Of course there is not agreement as to when the Book of Mormon was written. It is a sad fact that, because of this debate, almost all historical investigations into the book have been apologetic. Apologetics have their important place but not at the exclusion of interpretation. Every text can, to a greater or lesser degree, be better understood with a knowledge of the original historical language, setting, and author. It is tempting to avoid the question of the origin of the Book of Mormon in order to address both Mormon and non-Mormon. In certain limited approaches this is possible. There are certain passages that are more or less self-contained literary units, with little need for historical interpretive aids. The question of origin cannot ultimately be ignored, however, because the functions and meanings of Book of Mormon passages are intimately connected with history. A summary of past historical investigations will help us see some future interpretive possibilities.
American Continent Approach

The quality of the research varies in works dealing with American archaeology and the Book of Mormon. Generally such research reveals “more wishful thinking than accurate knowledge.” This unfortunately has made it difficult for more precise Mormon scholarship to gain an audience. I do not think that this area of history will presently provide any results for two reasons: first, because of lack of material. The Book of Mormon provides us with an approximate idea of the relative position of many of its cities, the narrow neck of land, and other geographical landmarks. But no archaeologist has been able to locate a single Nephite text or city. We cannot even locate the approximate areas of the Nephite or Lamanite civilizations. There are at least seven current theories attempting to locate these civilizations in different areas on the American continent. But even a recent Church editorial has described these attempts as useless speculation. We know nothing of the Nephites except what is provided in the Book of Mormon. This approach, therefore, has concentrated its efforts on civilizations that postdate the Book of Mormon in hopes of finding Nephite or Lamanite antecedents. Because of the lack of historical data, this approach is only used apologetically (to defend the divine origin of the book).

This leads to the second major difficulty: some of the material often used to show Nephite or Lamanite influence in America was available to Joseph Smith, and thus even the apologetic value is weak. An example is the legend of the appearance of Quetzalcoatl. Quetzalcoatl was a fair-skinned, bearded god of the Mayan religion. Mormons often see this as a corrupted form of the story of Christ’s visit to America. A number of Mormon authors have used this legend to prove the divine origin of the Book of Mormon. But it is never mentioned that the story of Quetzalcoatl was readily available to Joseph Smith. In short, this historical approach to the Book of Mormon provides no interpretive aids and only very weak apologetic material.

Near East Approach

The Near East approach, recognizing the difficulty with Nephite archaeology, attempts to place the Nephite scripture in its old world setting. It has been used for both interpretive and apologetic purposes. Mormons use this approach because they believe the nations in the Book of Mormon came from the Near East. Certainly the Book of Mormon is not in the tradition of nineteenth century literature. It has very little in common with such authors as Cooper and Hawthorne. Its closest relative is a product of the Near East: the Christian Bible. If I had to choose one phrase to describe the Book of Mormon, I would call it “The American Bible.” The form of the book as a whole and many of its smaller literary units are based on biblical forms of literature. Throughout the Book of Mormon are hundreds of biblical quotes and allusions presented in a biblical style.

Those who believe that the Book of Mormon is fiction will want to reduce the Near East Approach to a biblical approach, and that is perfectly legitimate. But a simple skimming of the Bible as a source book for Joseph Smith is inadequate; the Book of Mormon absorbed more from the Bible than meets the eye. The astonishing fundamentally similarities between the two books make the use of insights acquired from exhaustive biblical scholarship relevant to study of the Book of Mormon. Mormon scholars have purposely sought Near Eastern elements in the Book of Mormon that cannot be traced to the Bible in order to prove that the Book of Mormon is ancient. But I believe the important interpretive aids must be sought through the Bible itself, because it is the father of the Book of Mormon.

Let us take an example of how a biblical quote can help us interpret a Book of Mormon passage. “Wherefore, he said unto Eve, yea, even that old serpent, who is the devil, who is the father of all lies, wherefore he said: Partake of the forbidden fruit, and ye shall not die, but ye shall be as God, knowing good from evil.” This passage from II Nephi 2:18 is quite clearly taken from Genesis 3:4-5. Here, the Book of Mormon explicitly interprets the serpent as the devil (using phrases from Revelation 20:2 and John 8:44). Also, the phrase “ye shall be as gods” has been changed to “ye shall be as God.” For the Book of Mormon, there is only one God. This doctrine is summarized in Alma 11; “Now Zeezrom said: Is there more than one God? And he (Amulek) answered, No.” “Gods” in Genesis 3 was probably seen as a textual corruption and corrected in II Nephi. Thus, the subtle changes and wording in II Nephi interpret the Genesis passage. This example illustrates one aspect of the exceedingly fascinating and instructive relationship between the Bible and the Book of Mormon.

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Early Nineteenth Century Approach

Non-believers have been exploring the nineteenth century roots of the Book of Mormon since its publication. Even the best works using this approach are almost totally concerned with proofs of when the book originated. There has been relatively little interpretive effort.

A simple-minded use of this method tends to reduce or distort the Book of Mormon into a rubber stamp of its age. The Book of Mormon has been called a “sponge” and a “mirror” of the nineteenth century. Alexander Campbell stated that it discussed every issue current in early nineteenth century New York. But reducing any work to its historical setting distorts it. This is a typical error when studying any unfamiliar age. The better we understand a particular period, the less its artifacts appear exactly like each other. The problem is a methodological one; the meaning of a text is distorted when it is forced to conform to preconceived historical molds.

But such distortions of the Book of Mormon contain an element of truth. Nephi, Mormon, Moroni, and others clearly and purposely address the latter-day audience.
when the book would appear. Thus we find nineteenth century theological issues in the book; also style and word usage combine the English of the King James Bible and the nineteenth century. Therefore, certain words and phrases can only be adequately understood in the theological and historical setting of Joseph Smith's age.

One example of this can be found in Mormon 8:31; "Yea, it (the Book of Mormon) shall come in a day when there shall be great pollutions upon the face of the earth." I have heard this verse used a number of times to prove the prophetic value of the Book of Mormon. The speakers have pointed to the great environmental pollution as the fulfillment of this prophecy. But the word "pollution" in Joseph Smith's day never referred to physical pollution, only to moral corruption or sin. It is clear from its context that Mormon 8 is using the term "pollution" in the nineteenth century sense.

Mormon scholars have purposely sought Near Eastern elements that cannot be traced to the Bible in order to prove the Book of Mormon is ancient.

Another example of a nineteenth century phrase in the Book of Mormon can be seen in the sacramental prayer in Moroni 4; those who partake of the bread signify that "they are willing to take upon them the name of Christ." In the book of Mormon we see frequent references to the "name of Christ" (believe on his name, worship in his name, pray in his name, and do miracles in his name). These phrases have biblical precedents. 12

But the phrase "take the name of Christ upon you" is not biblical and must be understood in the nineteenth century context. To understand the phrase, we must first examine the primitivist movement in Joseph Smith's time. 13 The primitivist movement started in America after the revolution. It was, in part, a reaction to sectarian conflict, and it affected thousands of Americans in the early nineteenth century. These various primitivist movements and churches believed that the existing churches were corrupt, having departed from primitive Christianity. A number of these groups believed that the only proper biblical appellation for the church and the true believer was simply "Christian." For the primitivists in Joseph Smith's area, to "take upon you the name of Christ" meant to take upon you the designation "Christian" or "Christ."14

As with the primitivists, the Book of Mormon uses this phrase for the name of the true church, as well as a designation for individuals. It is clear that the Book of Mormon uses this phrase in a primitivist sense; "... all those who were true believers in Christ took upon them, gladly, the name of Christ, or Christians as they were called, because of their belief in Christ who should come."15 But in the Book of Mormon, this title signifies more than a name. It is unclear whether taking the name of Christ comes as a prerequisite to baptism or through baptism itself, 16 but it is accompanied by covenants of obedience and spiritual rebirth. 17 It signifies that Christ is close to the intentions and thoughts of one's heart. 18 It, in short, implies a certain relationship between the person and Christ, symbolically portrayed by an animal and its master. For both the church and the individual, it signifies possession by Christ. The "name" is only blotted out of the individual's heart through transgression. 19 The taking of Christ's name by the church implies that it teaches his doctrine. 20 For the Book of Mormon, this phrase is more than assuming the name "Christian" or "church of Christ"; it is all that that implies. So we can see why "there is no other name whereby salvation cometh; therefore, I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ."21 These are only two examples of the many instances when nineteenth century usage is helpful in interpreting the Book of Mormon.

In this discussion of historical criticism we have seen how the Book of Mormon relies on earlier historical sources and creatively molds each of them in a different way. We are entering the beginning of an era of interpretative historical criticism in Book of Mormon research. This approach will examine all of these inherited sources and demonstrate how the Book of Mormon shapes them for its own purposes.

Literary Criticism

The newest discipline to approach the Book of Mormon is literary criticism, and it would be difficult to overstate its importance. I believe that the future of the Book of Mormon lies in its hands. Religion and literature are intimate companions. As one literary critic put it: "The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry." 22 Images, myths, and symbols are the very substance of the spiritual life. 23 It is impossible to fully understand the Book of Mormon without understanding literary laws. The literary critic is in an ideal position to teach us the subtlety and variety of language in the Book of Mormon.

The importance of literary criticism can be seen in the interpretation of Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision. Lehi's dream is a spiritual map that contains a cluster of symbols. Nephi's vision follows this dream. In Nephi's vision, an angel interprets or transforms the cluster of symbols into a historical allegory; the symbols are transformed into signs of historical events. Signs function quite differently from symbols, and Nephi's vision in certain respects modifies Lehi's dream. There is a strong moral dualism in both the dream and vision; there are only two roads, two destinations, and only two churches. In Lehi's dream, the building is a symbol of evil or "the world." But in Nephi's vision the building represents all false religion (the historical Great and Abominable church). Now, the lack of distinction between Lehi's symbols and Nephi's historical signs has led to a debate as to whether or not the Great and Abominable church is the Catholic church. Since the building is a symbol for evil in Lehi's dream, it cannot be identified with Catholicism. Only in Nephi's allegory do we see specific allusions to Catholicism; and these are only historical examples of all false religion. 24 The question of the place of the Catholic church in this vision cannot be answered adequately without understanding how distinct literary forms function.

This is an example of the first task of literary criticism—definition of literary units (this may be the
book as a whole or any of the smaller literary units such as Lehi’s dream. There are a wide variety of literary units in our American Bible—from letter to dramatic monologue. And each one functions differently. We see examples all around us that may help us understand the importance of literary form. For instance, if I were to see a story that begins “Once upon a time” and ends “They lived happily ever after,” I should not attempt to criticize that story for its absurdity. In fact, I would expect it to be abistorical and perhaps even absurd. If I were to see another written document that begins “Our Father In Heaven” and ends “Amen,” I would have to conclude that its language is being used in a fundamentally different manner from that of the former document.

We cannot afford to ignore literary forms in the Book of Mormon because form and message are often inseparable. In fact, knowing the form will help us discover the message. Form criticism must be based on historical criticism because forms are historically conditioned. Even prophets speak in the language they inherit.

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Once these individual units are interpreted, we will be in a better position to interpret the entire work. The literary-historical interpretation of individual units will lay the groundwork for a number of other approaches, such as a broad theological approach. Since the Book of Mormon is such an ambitious work (it speaks on everything from political economy to infant baptism) nothing less than a theological overview will be able to grasp its broad messages. Theological attempts to date have twisted the Book of Mormon to match a preconceived theology.25

We have seen how the literary approach can be used to interpret historically conditioned forms. Every work, to some degree, is a prisoner of its historical setting. But there is a second task for literary criticism. Symbolic and religious language often contain hidden elements that transcend historical setting, and the literary critic is best trained to grasp these universal qualities of language. A strictly historical approach to the Book of Mormon will make it look strange and outdated from a modern point of view. If the book cannot speak to us, if its world cannot change our world, it is probably not worth a second reading. So the literary critic must call us to understand ourselves anew in the presence of a historical text. The hours of scholarship will have been worth it as soon as the historical chains binding the Book of Mormon are broken and it can become either the gardener of our ideals or the prophet of our blindness. The literary critic can help us not only understand the original meaning of sacred language but also restore its significance to a world where nothing is significant and everything is relative. This cultural difference between the Book of Mormon and our age is large and there are two temptations to be avoided. We must avoid being too proud to let the Book of Mormon challenge our modern presumptions and beware of being too gullible to let modern presumptions challenge the Book of Mormon. If we avoid these, the dialogue will be a challenging dialogue of fundamental questions between the reader and the Book of Mormon. That dialogue must rest upon, and be the driving inspiration for, sound scholarship.

The Book of Mormon scholarship of the future will be somewhat different from that of the past. Its apologetic past has made it a defense of an extant faith. But its interpretative nature in the future will give it power to mold and modify faith. I am of the hope that Book of Mormon scholarship can mold a purer faith and a nobler Mormonism. I am of the opinion that a spiritual trek is at hand for Mormonism, and that the scholar’s word will be one of those that guide the Church’s future. And any Book of Mormon scholarship that will give direction to this journey will have to be an eclectic scholarship, combining textual, historical, and literary criticisms.

Notes
5. One of the great religious debates of the nineteenth century was on the godhead. These theological positions provide all of the variety of the early Christian church. The most common position was that the godhead contained three persons with one essence. On the extremes, some Unitarians believed that Jesus was not “the very eternal God” (hence, denying his divinity) and there were those who believed that “God,” “Jesus,” and the “Holy Ghost” were merely three separate titles for the same Being. This latter position is known as modal trinitarianism or Sabellianism. The Book of Mormon constantly stresses the divinity of Jesus and the unity of the trinity. It is almost certainly modal trinitarian but general enough in its wording to be acceptable to a more orthodox reader who might interpret the book with imprecision. In this connection, see II Nephi 26:12; Alma 11:26-29; 38-39;44; Mosiah 15:1-5.
8. One example is Ethan Smith, View of the Hebrews; or The Tribes of Israel in America, second edition (Poulney, Vt., 1825), pp. 204-207. Smith considered Quetzalcoat a corrupted form of the story of Moses.
9. Specific examples of biblical forms have been discussed in the following articles: Steven P. Sundrup, “The Psalm of Nephi: A Lyric Reading,” Proceedings of the Symposia of the Association for Mormon Letters 1978-79 (Salt Lake City, 1979), pp. 79-93; John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” BYU Studies 10 (Autumn 1970): 69-84; Mark Thomas, “Listening to the Voice From the Dust,” Sunstone 4 (Jan.-Feb. 1979): 22-24. There are a number of other forms that have yet to be treated in published works. The only nineteenth century forms are I
The Book of Mormon and the Anthon Transcript: An Interim Report

Edward H. Ashment

According to statements made at its beginning ¹ and near its end, ² the Book of Mormon was written in a form of the Egyptian language. This would indicate that during their 1,000-year history the Nephites maintained a tradition of using Egyptian as a scriptural language. But they apparently did not originate this practice, for Nephi was not the first to write in "the language of the Egyptians." In fact, he was only continuing a tradition which already had been established among his relatives in the Old World, for had Lehi not been "taught in the language of the Egyptians," he would not have been able to read the engravings on the brass plates. ³

It seems that this scriptural language evolved through time, each new generation altering its form somewhat so that by the end of Nephite history it did not resemble its presumably more archaic form on the brass plates. Thus, Moroni declared that the Egyptian language which the Nephites used became "reformed" through the years, being "altered by us, according to our manner of speech." ⁴ However, it is also true that knowledge of the older form of the language was maintained throughout Nephite history, for Mormon was capable of reading not only the small plates of Nephi ⁵ (which Nephi began ca. 1,000 years before Mormon) but also the brass plates ⁶ (which potentially were much older).

The identification of this older form of "the language of the Egyptians" which Lehi learned cannot be clearly ascertained, although it obviously was the same form as the Egyptian on the brass plates. One reason why its exact nature remains obscure lies in the fact that the date of the composition of the brass plates is unknown—a problem which is further complicated by the possibilities that the material on the brass plates could have been written over a number of years or it could have been recorded within a short period of time. In the former case, an older form of Egyptian would probably have been used, while in the latter a more recent form would have been in order.

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Consequently, the record on the brass plates could have been written in archaistic Middle Egyptian (which, by the time preceding Lehi, was being "retained as the religious language" in Egypt7), in Late Egyptian (which flourished from ca. 1554 to ca. 710 B.C.), or in Demotic (which came into use ca. 710 B.C. and died ca. 470 A.D.). Nephi clearly had to learn the same type of Egyptian as did his father (and as would anyone else who would want to read the brass plates), which would be the type of Egyptian expected to be in use at least at the beginning of the small plates of Nephi. Moreover, that type of Egyptian presumably would be recognizable as a known form of ancient Egyptian.

The characters on the Anthon Transcript are not thus recognizable. The author has studied them with one of the world's foremost Demoticists. They have resisted decipherment as Demotic and stand just as little chance of representing earlier forms of ancient Egyptian. A possible conclusion is that the characters of the Anthon transcript were not copied from the small plates of Nephi but were extracted from the large plates of Nephi which Mormon abridged. In that case the characters might at best bear a minimal resemblance to Egyptian because the language had been "altered."

A number of the characters closely resemble hieroglyphics of the Micmac Indians.

That the characters came from this source seems probable, for soon after Joseph Smith produced the Anthon Transcript he commenced dictating the abridged portion of the large plates of Nephi. The 116-page manuscript which resulted from translating this section was later lost, so if it is true that the prophet's extract for the "learned" to translate came from this part of the book, then none of the extant Book of Mormon could serve as a translation "pony."

The improbability that the characters of the Anthon Transcript are related to any known form of Egyptian does not rule out comparative studies, however, for a number of the characters closely resemble some of the hieroglyphics of the Micmac Indians of northeastern North America. Apparently, some of the Micmac hieroglyphs have been in use for years, while more signs were added by Father Leclercq and Abbe Maillard in the early eighteenth century. The historical development of this writing system deserves serious study by qualified persons.

A proper interim conclusion is: Moroni's statement that "none other people knoweth our language" must still be seriously considered.
Freschet in the Dearth: Samuel W. Taylor’s Heaven Knows Why and Mormon Humor

by Richard H. Cracroft

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I

While it is profoundly true that, as Henry James insisted, “It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature,” it is equally and too-soberly true that it takes a great deal of sifting through Mormon belle and not-so-belle lettres to uncover even one page of intentional humor.

Excuses are freely given in behalf of the nineteenth century Saints, who were too busy, we remind ourselves, building and fleeing and preaching to pause for breath and perspective on their lives, the perspective that begets humor. Modern readers, anxious to find the revealing self-knowledge of humor among the nineteenth century Saints, point with too-steady fingers to the occasional bon-mots of Joseph Smith or Brigham Young, or to the few memorable humorous passages in the works of Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, Eliza R. Snow, John Lyon, or even the little known Scipio Africanus Kenner. But the fact remains: There is little of that sense called humor manifest in nineteenth century Mormon literature, public or private.

And when one turns, hopeful, to the twentieth century, it soon becomes apparent that celestial hopes (if humor can ever be celestial) are again eclipsed by telestial realities, and the Mormon funnybone remains too nearly unassailed. One must search far into the first half of the twentieth century before turning up any intentionally sustained published humor. Among the folk there is always humor, particularly the anomalous jokelore which clusters about J. Golden Kimball and the Sanpete Scandinavians, but such folk humor is countered by sundry Church Section editorials and Church Presidents’ asides in General Conference which warn against humor from the pulpit and in the Church classroom.

Yet there are some hopeful signs. Emerging from decades of roadshows, such plays as Keith Engar’s All in Favor, Carol Lynn Pearson’s The Order is Love, or Douglas Stewart’s Saturday’s Warrior and its several light-hearted though less satisfactory spinoffs, show a stirring of inter-

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est among the membership of the Church that bodes well for a better popular reception for Mormon humor. At the same time, Virginia Kammeyer has published a light book of humorous poems entitled Saints Alive, and Carol Lynn Pearson has demonstrated in her Busy Bishop's Notebook and its successors that Saints are willing to pay a dollar for a laugh, while Calvin Grondahl, in his very successful book of Mormon cartoons, Freeway to Perfection, has stretched their willingness to $3.75. Donald R. Marshall has increased the price tag, if not the interest, by sandwiching into his The Rummage Sale and, to a lesser extent in Frost in the Orchard, some of the finest pieces of sustained Mormon humor written thus far. Indeed, it is in just such serious collections as Marshall's that Mormon humor seems most likely to flourish as a kind of relief from more straight-faced literature.

Certainly the most sustained popular humor in the Mormon tradition is found in what might be called the "happy family" books in the style of Clarence Day's Life With Father or Rosemary Taylor's Chicken Every Sunday. In this tradition, Rodello Hunter's nationally popular House of Many Rooms was well received by Church members, though her more acerbic A Daughter of Zion met with notably less enthusiasm. Probably best received of all these books has been Papa Married a Mormon, by John D. Fitzgerald, author of the Great Brain books.

Not as popular, but of primary importance to Mormon literature, is Samuel W. Taylor's Family Kingdom (1951). This quasi-family history of the John W. Taylor families, steeped in Mormon "peculiarities" and tinctured with universal family humor, was republished several years ago to supply the continuing demands of a variety of readers who enjoy Mormon on the rocks with a twist of lemon. It took a Sam Taylor to turn the sober marriage proposals of his father, a Mormon apostle, into the delightful and occasionally bittersweet comedy made possible when, for example, that marriage proposal is to a fourth or fifth wife, and spiced by an innocent suggestion by the revered apostle that the first wife accompany the bride and groom on their honeymoon. It took a Sam Taylor to make that Mormon apostle at once a lovable bumbler and a spiritual giant, and to turn the problems and squabbles of multiple families into unforgettable Mormon comedy which has made Family Kingdom a near-classic in Mormon non-fiction, or semi-fiction, for the difference is not always great in Sam Taylor's works.

But it is in a strictly fictional work, in Taylor's little known but truly delightful Heaven Knows Why (1948), that he has created the best Mormon comic novel to date. While Professor Kenneth B. Hunsaker has been understandably hyperbolic in calling the book "the most delightful of all Mormon novels," he is right in insisting that Heaven Knows Why is an "outstanding comic novel," which is "different from all other Mormon novels." Unfortunately, the praise is slightly tarnished when one must add that the book is, as far as I know, the only full-length comic novel in Mormon letters; however, such a qualification does not, in fact, diminish the worth of the novel, which is a joyful tour de force.

First serialized in six parts in Collier's as "The Mysterious Way," Heaven Knows Why was published in 1948 by A. A. Wyn, Inc., of New York, and named an alternate selection for the Literary Guild. Although it was widely noticed and favorably reviewed, the novel raised a small storm in Utah. Indeed, Taylor suggested in a recent conversation that the book was a kind of litmus paper among Mormons — it was either violently loved or hated.

As with so many of the Mormon books of the 1940s, it is presently difficult to understand why Heaven Knows Why was ever controversial. Today the novel seems innocently funny, one of the few works—Mormon or non-Mormon—which moves the reader, on nearly every page, to a response which ranges from a quiet chuckle to boisterous belly laughs—not at the expense of personal conviction or the LDS faith, but at the refreshing combination of things familiarly Mormon and things erringly human into a series of hilarious situations.

The book, only recently reprinted by Millenial Publications, is unique and should be well-known among Mormon scholars, for, as I hope to show, the novel affords an excellent example of the possibilities of in- and out-group Mormon humor, and an opportunity to consider briefly why there has been so little Mormon humor when its effect can be so healthy.

It takes a great deal of sifting through Mormon letters to uncover even one page of intentional humor.

II

Heaven Knows Why braced its contents between two bookends comprised of heavenly scenes featuring the late but now angelic Moroni Skinner. Moroni has just lost promotion to Chief Checker of the Compiling Office because of his preoccupation with the rapidly deteriorating state of his and Lucy's grandson, Jackson Skinner Whitetop, a handsome and lazy young veteran of the very recent World War II who now exists on the remnants of the once-proud Skinner ranch in a western Utah valley which Taylor has recently identified as Deep Creek Valley at Ibapah.

An angel, Moroni Skinner visits his relative.
After requesting and receiving “limited orders” (with seventeen carbon copies) permitting him to make one appearance to his wayward grandson, Moroni Skinner journeys to earth and undertakes his short-term mission. Moroni makes a practice appearance to old Milo Ferguson, a crusty apostate of recent vintage; but Milo, though he is finally convinced of Moroni’s otherworldly reality, still refuses to be overawed or to believe.

Now more confident, Moroni materializes in Jackson’s untidy bedroom and solemnly tells his grandson that he is “from beyond.” “Beyond what?” asks the stunned Jackson; then, recognizing that the visitor is indeed his late grandfather, Jackson stammers, “You’re Grandpa S-Skinner. How’s a—tricks up there, Grandpa? How’s Grandma Lucy Skinner?” (p. 31). A solemn Moroni then presents his message to Jackson without benefit of scriptural phrasing: “I’m telling you to straighten up, fix up your place, and marry Katie Jensen. That is my message” (p. 33).

Stunned but obedient, Jackson goes immediately to confide in Bishop Jensen. The Bishop is dumbfounded and, left alone in his study, prays for guidance. His wife, Beryl, a doubting convert to the Church who has long eavesdropped on her husband’s interviews with Ward members, listens in. Concerned that her daughter might marry the no-good Jackson Whitetop, Beryl places a milk can to the thin partition and speaks through it, in a voice ringing with eternity, and demands that Jackson be allowed to marry Katie only when he has solved “The Trouble,” a longstanding feud between the north and south sectors of the valley, both of which believed the Lord desired a new chapel to be built in their respective neighborhoods.

Moved to action by his own revelation, the Bishop, with Katie, visits Jackson, and explains to him that he must solve “The Trouble” before he can claim Katie’s hand. A confident Jackson promptly proposes marriage to Katie, who, though flattered, turns him down.

Complications arise in the person of Henry, the Bishop’s unregenerate and worldly First Counselor, who has sired an illegitimate child (and arranges to have Jackson acknowledged as the father), has stolen Jackson’s sheep, and is intent on marrying Katie. The un-ravelling begins, however, at the shotgun wedding which Henry has arranged between Jackson and Anita, the mother of Henry’s child. Just as the good Bishop, far gone on innocently imbibed hard cider, begins to perform the marriage of Anita and Jackson, Milo Ferguson arrives from Salt Lake City and reveals his discovery that Henry is a thief—and the father of Anita’s child. Bishop Jensen hastily marries Anita and Henry.

Another stunning event follows: In a dramatic meeting of all the valley Saints held that evening Apostle Black insists that the burial plot of Milo’s late wife must be the property on which the controversial chapel will be built. Claiming now to understand why Moroni Skinner appeared to him, Milo rises to his feet, testifies to his continued unbelief, and offers his property, which Apostle Black promptly dedicates. Jackson, “The Trouble” now resolved, elopes with Katie, promising that he will take her to the temple as soon as he is ordained an elder. The Bishop’s wife, Beryl, who had deceived her husband with the milk-can revelation, now understands that the Lord had worked through her, the Bishop, Jackson, and Moroni Skinner to expose Henry and solve “The Trouble.” She thus comes belatedly to a testimony of the Church, and all ends well.

Most of these literary clergymen, like Bishop Jensen, plod innocently on to eventual triumph over the human and satanic forces that would belittle and destroy them.

The bookend of Heaven Knows Why is found in a return to heaven, where Moroni, now at ease regarding his happily married grandson, has been promoted to Chief Checker of the Compiling Office of the Accounting Section of the Current History Division of the Records Department, and, because “progress and glory are eternal” (p. 211), is moving into better quarters, much to Lucy’s joy.

III

Heaven Knows Why is not a great book but it is a very funny book—a fresher in the dearth of Mormon humor. Taylor’s aim was to entertain, and he is amused by Professor Hunsaker’s claim that there is a not-too-subtle parallelism between the story of Moroni Skinner and Jackson Whitetop and the story of Joseph Smith and various heavenly visitors.7 While the idea is feasible, to burden the lightweight plot of Heaven Knows Why with such heavy allegory would be to freight the book beyond its capacity to float lighter than air.

In fact, the book can bear no such serious interpretation. It is a light, tastefully handled, and very funny novel. The story, Taylor insists, is “a sugar-coated sermon on the power of faith,” a novel not written to satirize Mormons or things Mormon, but to entertain human beings who like to read about the foibles and the joys of other human beings, regardless of their faith.
In this Taylor is successful, for Heaven Knows Why appeals to both Gentile and Saint, and his comical yet only slightly barbed treatment of Mormon customs, revelation, and the Word of Wisdom shows how the Matter of Utah can be dealt with in a delightfully refreshing, funny, yet painless manner.

Knowing that he is aiming at millions of Collier's readers—an overwhelmingly non-Mormon readership—Taylor wisely refuses to become stuck on the reef of Mormon terminology. Consequently, the book is very nearly free of nomenclature peculiar to Mormon organization or belief. Taylor also manages to avoid the straits of polygamy and thus keeps the reader's mind cluttered by received cultural notions that have generally accompanied any mention of plural marriage. He even sets the novel in a remote Utah valley, and while the time is post-World War II, the Mormon folkways and attitudes suggest the 1920s, a less complex world of yesteryear.

Bishop Jensen is the central comic figure in the novel. And while some Mormons would take offense that a man holding the office of Bishop is being treated lightly, most Mormon and non-Mormon readers will see the Bishop in the well-defined literary tradition of the sincere clergyman whose continuing innocence in a fallen world makes him vulnerable and may even imperil his peace of mind for a time. Most of these literary clergymen, like Bishop Jensen, plod innocently on to eventual triumph over the human and satanic forces that would belittle and destroy them. Thus all readers can enjoy the plight of the Bishop, regardless of their perspective. So, when the devoted Bishop barks his knuckle on a wrench and cries, "You misbegotten son of perdition... You illegitimate offspring of an unnatural union," readers agree with Jackson, who notes that he "admired the man's ability to cuss without using profanity" (pp. 36-37), and mentally underscore the Bishop's humanity and not his Mormonness.

Similarly, any reader must be sympathetic with the good Bishop's very human confusion about revelation. As a sound and sober twentieth-century man, the Bishop is naturally skeptical about visitations. At the same time, he is a believer. His two sides clash, however, and he muses, "Trouble was that some abused the privilege. All you had was a person's word for a thing like [a visitation.] You had to draw a line between the genuine... wishful, and mistaken. Not to mention... recreation" (p. 38). Thus, when Jackson, following Moroni Skinner's visitation, the Bishop is troubled, partly because he has never had a visitation, "or so much as a prompting."

So the Bishop rejoices when he also hears the voice of the Lord, albeit through his wife's milk can, and he is thrilled to have become worthy of such a manifestation. Later, when he learns that his revelation was wifely and not heavenly, the Bishop decides that, after all, it really was the Lord speaking through her, for the apparently false revelation clearly led to a much-welcome solution of "The Trouble," a unified congregation, and to Beryl's gaining a testimony of the gospel. Taylor's tone is not ambiguous. He is not mocking revelation, faith, Bishops, or the LDS Church; instead, he is dealing lightly with the very human problem of the skeptical-believer, a problem not peculiar to Latter-day Saints.

Taylor uncovers a similar universal problem in his comic treatment of the Bishop and the Word of Wisdom. Henri Bergson has written that "rigidity is the comic, and laughter is the corrector," and in the good Bishop, Taylor gently assails rigidity. The righteous, well-meaning, and innocent Bishop is duped by nearly all his Word-of-Wisdom breaking associates into violating the Word of Wisdom, although he is never aware of his fall. Indeed, at some point in the book, most of the characters violate the Word of Wisdom, most of them with an excuse similar to that of Henry Brown, who claims at various times that the doctor has ordered him to drink hard cider and coffee—for his back. "Gentile doctors don't realize the value of coffee as a medicine" (p. 63), comments Jackson wryly.

In one of the funniest scenes in the book, Bishop Jensen has just dropped in on Jackson and finds him brewing a pot of coffee and experiencing tobacco hunger. Says the Bishop, through the door:

"I see you are living the Word of Wisdom," the voice said acidly.

The bishop's purple-ringed eyes were peering through the shotgun hole in the kitchen door. The bishop's nose was sniffing the rich brown aroma. Jackson scratched his chest vigorously instead of pulling out the tobacco. "Just having a cup of Coffee-Near," he said desperately.

"Coffee-Near? What's that?"

"Just an old family recipe. Make it out of wheat and dandelion roots and stuff. Got it from the Indians. Nearest thing to coffee we ever tasted, so we just call it Coffee-Near."

"Don't say." The bishop sniffed at the tantalizing odor wafting through the hole. "Just made out of wholesome grains and roots?"

"And the seed of a berry," Jackson said, not wanting to stretch the truth beyond recognition.

"It smells wonderful," the bishop hinted.
Taylor succeeded, for the Literary Guild reviewer and several other reviewers agree that the book was "side-splitting," "a funny book that is funny." And, to Taylor’s credit, some reviews even forgot to mention that the book was about Mormons.11

Literature either had to be faith-promoting and full of flawless stereotypes, or it was anti-Mormon, there was nothing in between.

IV

But the serialization of "The Mysterious Way" in Collier’s and its subsequent publication in book form as Heaven Knows Why raised another kind of unexpected response which must give Mormons pause. Taylor notes, in a memorandum to the BYU depository, that

When the story began running in Collier’s, the mail poured in. Some readers thought it was the funniest thing they’d ever read. But the reaction of others made me realize that the Mormons simply were not accustomed to the type of literature about themselves which was so enjoyed by Jews and Gentiles about themselves. Mormons had been conditioned to judging by black and white—for or against. Literature either had to be faith-promoting and full of flawless stereotypes as characters, or it was anti-Mormon; there was nothing in between.12

Perhaps this period has passed. Perhaps firmer-rooted Latter-day Saints enjoying the sesquicentenary maturity of the Church are prepared to see themselves in larger context. Perhaps the Saints are ready to agree with George Washington Harris that “A little nonsense now and then/Is relished by the wisest men.”13 Perhaps. More likely, however, Mormons are not completely ready for Mormon Art Buchwalds or Mormon Erma Bombecks or Mormon Bill Arps or especially Mormon Mark Twains. There are several reasons why they are not ready and several reasons why they should be.

Taylor himself has argued in a Dialogue article14 that as long as the Church has a “managed press” we will not have a Mormon or regional literature, much less a Mormon humor. But there are more important reasons, for Mormon literature in the non-managed press, from the solemn, humorless profundities of Dialogue to the almost puritan tales of Douglas Thayer and the occasional lighter stories of Eileen Gibbons Kump and Donald R. Marshall, underscore E. B. White’s memorable comment that too many Mormons seem to feel that “if a thing is funny it can be presumed to be something less than great, because if it were truly great it would be wholly serious.”15 Mormons continue to insist that we are a humor-loving people, but it remains a fact that our humor, literary or folk, is frequently derivative, often contrived, and generally treated with suspicion. The reason seems to lie deeper than a so-called “managed press,” which is a symptom, not a cause.
Humor, lawless as it is, enables a Latter-day Saint to flex and reminds him of the need for flexing in lieu of snapping.

Part of the reason for this change is the remarkable sense the Latter-day Saint has in being at stage center and participating in a cosmic drama in which he is a major protagonist. Each Mormon becomes, as it were, Joseph Smith in his own grove, and has, thanks to the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God, a terrific sense of his individual importance. To laugh at any aspect of this drama may seem somehow to be a diminution of that role.

And in playing that important and one-time role for keeps, Mormons are made deeply aware of Platonic appearances and realities. The world, charged with the grandeur of God, becomes a darkened mirror of the divine, for to the Lord and consequently to Latter-day Saints “all things... are spiritual.” In such a context a sensitive member of the Church often feels guilty about the caustic, the sardonic, the too-urban and too-skeptical, for he is keenly aware that the world is a kind of negative film which will soon be developed into a positive print, the distortions airbrushed, the shadows properly adjusted, and the focus, the settings, and the characters perfected.

Furthermore, Mormons are committed, if they accept their theology wholly, to a millenialist position which reminds that “the time is far spent, there is little remaining” until worthy Saints are caught up to join the Savior in his advent. This sense of destiny overwhelms and soberers and leads to a necessary warning of one’s neighbors, and to a need to present before the world the best possible image of the Church, the vehicle of this theology. To many, a comic world view, with its built-in sting, detracts from that image.

The very nature of our perception of the universe seems to array itself, then, against the possibility of Latter-day Saint humor. Unlike the Jewish sense of good-humored schimpfen with God, exemplified in such works as Fiddler on the Roof, the Latter-day Saint’s relationship to God is more formal, more hierarchical. God exists at the pinnacle of a ladder that begins with the individual and climbs through a hierarchy of Church authorities to the Prophet, to Christ, and to God. At each level the Mormon becomes more subject to authority and increasingly distrusts the democracy of his position. At each level he sees a diminution of humor, and seems increasingly hesitant to project the barbs of humor at levels too much higher than his own. Consequently, Mormons can laugh at humor about themselves, their Bishops, and even their Stake Presidents, but they generally grow nervous as they listen to jokes about General Authorities, and very uncomfortable about humor concerning the First Presidency; thus humor about deity, unless it is clearly strengthening to the Mormon position, is rarely tolerated. With these powerful theological guns arrayed against them, it is little wonder that Mormon humorists, wherever they are, have settled for an occasional innocuous and much hacked-at paragraph in The Ensign or The New Era.

But in this dearth the Mormon people have lost rich opportunity for personal growth, not to mention the healthy release and well-being promoted through humor, particularly humor basically in sympathy with the Mormon people. There is, then, a need among Mormons who accept the divinity of the Church and its destiny for a humor which enables them to admit, within their own contexts, their own frailties, and the inevitable frailties of their leaders and organizations, the difficulty which arises when man, with his Nephi-Lemuel nature, must plod forward in faith along a dimly lighted path which remains discernable only to the Lord. In this context a Mormon humor can aid in fostering corrective adjustments, in promoting self-understanding, and in teaching others.

Humor, lawless as it is, enables a Latter-day Saint to flex and reminds him of the need for flexing in lieu of snapping. This need was made clear in the humorous second-wave response of the Mormon people to the serious revelation of June 1, 1978, regarding the black and the priesthood. Within a few days Mormons were making jokes about the black and the temple and talking facetiously of necessary changes in well-established Church procedures and customs, and within a week some were whispering that Saints were now singing, “Come, come ye Saints, Do-dah, do-dah.” More inflexible Mormons probably took offense, but such humor, which may never be written, is a sign of healthy adjustment to a sudden change in a longstanding uncomfortable condition, and demonstrates the power of humor in aiding Saints to adjust to change in a world where even the apparent absolutes are ephemeral.

Similarly, humor can make us self-aware, teach us about ourselves, and assist us to teach others about ourselves. Mark Twain insisted that “Humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever.” The moral universe which surrounds Mormon theology promotes the didactic, and so does humor. Thus when Brother Ezra Cooper, in Carol Lynn Pearson’s The Order is Love, hears Sister Burrows castigate her husband as a “lazy, no account excuse for a man,” Ezra responds with a healing, teaching, self-awareness which is both profound and funny. “Sister Burrows,” he says, “the Lord hasn’t asked us to confess other people’s sins—just our own.” In the
same play, when Ezra Cooper tells how he came to live in Southern Utah, we note how humor exemplifies at once Ezra’s faith and his humanity. When questioned about the possibility of a mistake in sending the Saints to the desert regions of Southern Utah, Brigham Young responds, “There’s no mistake... But don’t take my word for it. You go home and pray about it.” Says Ezra, in an answer which reflects both heaven and earth, “So I went home and prayed about it—damn it!”

There will be an increasing need to reinforce the humanness of Church members to a critical world-wide audience which is primarily conscious of Mormonism’s peculiarities.

There is an important place in Mormon culture and Mormon letters for both an in-group and an out-group literary humor. At least a corner of the void of in-group humor is being very slowly filled by works such as Grondahl’s Freeway to Perfection, by musical drama—such as my word can survive the onslaught of sober and serious Mormon critics—and by such funny stories as Donald R. Marshall’s “May the Good Lord Bless and Keep You,” featuring Elder Calbert Dunkley and Miss Floydene Wallup of Mink Creek, Idaho. But there is room for many more such funny explorations of the Mormon world, room for books and poems and articles which provide gently medicinal stings which most Mormons can increasingly tolerate, and which will depend for their success, in part at least, upon the reader’s or viewer’s grasp of familiar Mormon particularities, as well as upon their appreciation of universal human verities.

But the out-group literary humor of Mormonism remains a wasteland, as Mormon writers hesitate, for at least some of the reasons noted earlier, to communicate comically about what Latter-day Saints take so seriously. As the Church continues its rapid growth, there will be an increasing need to reinforce the humanness of Church members to a critical world-wide audience which is primarily conscious of Mormonism’s peculiarities.

While the several non-fictional and humorous accounts of large Mormon families go far toward communicating Mormon humanity to the world, they also insist upon these Mormon peculiarities. In Samuel W. Taylor’s Heaven Knows Why, however, one finds a unique example of a comic novel which admirably performs what Taylor has called “indirect missionary work” through its warm and friendly treatment of Mormons as fellow human beings, not as peculiarities, at the same time that it communicates familiarly with Mormons, puts them at ease, and teaches them, subtly but surely, perspective on bumper-sticker self-righteousness. Heaven Knows Why, and similar as yet unwritten comical treatments of Mormons and Mormonism, should be encouraged as a refreshing and restorative force, albeit a sub-force, in Mormon culture and letters.

The very nature of our perception of the universe seems to array itself against the possibility of Latter-day Saint humor.

Notes
17. Doctrine and Covenants 29:34.
20. Ibid., p. 17.