A look at the order in which Joseph Smith translated the books in the Book of Mormon can account for some of its textual puzzles.

HISTORICAL CRITICISM AND THE BOOK OF MORMON: A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER

By Edwin Firmage Jr.

TEN YEARS AGO, AS A FIRST-YEAR GRADUATE student at Berkeley, my ambition was to become another Hugh Nibley, whose writings I had loved since I was twelve. As a young admirer, I didn't understand everything I read. On my first encounter, I wasn't quite sure, for example, what the difference was between Sethe and Seth; it was all German to me. But, Nibley was my mystagogue. Through him I had my first vision of a strange and exciting antiquity. Even now, despite a very different scholarly outlook, I admire Nibley; he remains, to my mind, the most original thinker and social critic our church has known.

As a neophyte, but armed with German, and a little Arabic, Greek, and Hebrew, and intent on acquiring the requisite apologetic tools, I went to Berkeley to study ancient Near Eastern languages, and particularly Egyptian, the language of mysteries par excellence. Not long after my arrival, I was asked to teach the Book of Mormon gospel doctrine class in the Berkeley Ward. I welcomed the opportunity, as it would give me a chance to delve into the book to a degree that I hadn't since my mission. By the usual LDS standards, I was as ready as one can be to teach scripture. My wife and I regularly attended church and the temple, and we prayed together. My history was nothing but faithful. I had every reason to expect that my study of the Book of Mormon would reward me, as it had in the past, with an increase of faith.

But, it didn't. To this day I don't entirely understand why, but within just six months I no longer believed the Book of Mormon to be an ancient text. I can isolate several issues that played a role in my change of mind, but none of them should have been significant enough in itself to have caused such a turn of mind. Indeed, even taken together they seem inadequate to the task of breaking down my wall of faith. I have often thought that my Berkeley experience was fundamentally a conversion, or, if you like, an anti-conversion. The process had all of the inscrutable suddenness that characterized some of the conversions I had witnessed as a missionary. Like a conversion, the effects of my change of mind propagated with amazing speed. Almost overnight, my whole outlook on life was different. The particular problems that I encountered as I re-read the Book of Mormon were catalysts, not the active agents, of my reform. Something else far more powerful was ultimately the force behind the conversion. I don't know why that something had the effect it did, any more than I know why conversion on occasion seemed radically to alter newcomers to the faith. One thing is certain: a close reading of the Book of Mormon provoked this change. How ironic, I thought, that after doing precisely what then Apostle Ezra Taft Benson had been admonishing us to do—studying the Book of Mormon—I found myself regarding it as a work of historical fiction.

My study of the Book of Mormon now took a different direction. Since I had given up on its historicity, how was I to explain its origin? Thus began an intensive period of study that culminated in a hastily written document on Book of Mormon origins, which I completed in the summer of 1984. Producing this document was an exercise in catharsis; for a time, I did little else. Once it was done, I felt little inclination to return to the Book of Mormon as an object of serious study. Perhaps coincidentally, my interest in Egyptian also waned. But my interest in ancient history, if anything, increased. More and more I was drawn into the world of ancient Israel, and particularly its cult. I was now free to enter into biblical study without having to perform mental gymnastics to make the Bible conform to a Mormon world view. Once again, I was

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fortunate to have a guide. However, this time, the guide was not mystagogue, but rabbi and teacher. For the next two years, under Jacob Milgrom, I read the book of Leviticus. In good Jewish tradition, our study was painstaking, methodical, down-to-earth, and always rooted in the text. By the end of my third year, our graduate seminar in biblical Hebrew had covered, I think, eight chapters in all. After years of looking at Nibley's big picture, I now had a chance to see its finer detail.

By the standards of the German scholars who established historical biblical criticism, my Berkeley training was decidedly conservative. Jacob Milgrom, in company with other leading Jewish scholars (Moshe Weinfeld, Moshe Greenberg, and Yehezkel Kaufman, to mention just a few), has criticized many of the assumptions and conclusions of biblical criticism as practiced by the German school. But, on at least some basic principles, there is agreement. First, all agree that the Bible can and should be studied as a historical document. Second, all agree that there exist in the Pentateuch or Torah—the focus of historical critical study—at least three separate traditions, usually denoted as J (or JE), P, and D, each with its own distinctive style, vocabulary, and subject matter. Textual, literary, and linguistic methods have been developed to identify those traditions and other strands woven into the biblical text by its various editors and authors. Not infrequently, these biblical traditions are at odds with each other. Further, within each tradition, it is often possible to detect historical development over time and differing points of view. Third, all agree that our understanding of all of these traditions is greatly advanced by comparative study of contemporary literature from the ancient Near East.

These are a few of the basic tenets of historical criticism. Of these, at least two are applicable to Book of Mormon research: the Book of Mormon, too, can be studied as a historical document, and it should be compared with contemporary literature. The question, of course, is to what time period the book should be attributed, and with what literature it should be compared. In this paper, I hope to show how identifying it as a composition of Joseph Smith facilitates our understanding of the work, much as historical analysis illuminates the Bible.

What follows are a few of what for me in 1984 were discoveries of some importance in my search to discover how the Book of Mormon came into being. These observations do not by any means constitute a comprehensive explanation of the book. They are offered less as proofs of my thesis that the book is of modern origin than as examples of how the assumption that it is modern resolves otherwise significant difficulties.

THE EGYPTIAN CONNECTION

I will start with the Book of Mormon's Egyptian connection that at first so fascinated me. Like many pseudepigraphic works before it, the Book of Mormon announces itself as an ancient text miraculously preserved by divine providence. In this respect, it is not particularly noteworthy as a piece of pseudepigrapha. It is, however, rather less like its apocryphal congeners in that it also lays claim to an Egyptian genealogy—a genealogy that has attracted authors of sapiential, magical, and alchemical works since Greco-Roman times, but which seems out of place in a work of Christian apologetics. In view of Joseph Smith's involvement in popular magic, one might perhaps be inclined to seek the origin of the Book of Mormon's Egyptian genealogy in Egypt's age-old association with the world of magic. Certainly the Book of Mormon is an instance of that syncretism of traditions that is so characteristic of Joseph Smith. But the Book of Mormon's Egyptian connection has a simpler explanation.

Nephi, the first and most important of the putative writers whose compositions make up the Book of Mormon, tells us that his work was written "in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2).[1] The plain sense of this statement is that the Book of Mormon was written in Egyptian, while its theology derived from Judaism.[2] That Lehi's family read and wrote Egyptian is also evident in the fact that the "plates of brass," which had been kept by Lehi's kin, are also said to have been written in Egyptian (Mosiah 1:4). Lehi was at pains to preserve this linguistic heritage (anyone who has ever had to learn Egyptian can sympathize). Soon after leaving Jerusalem, he asks his sons to return and get the plates of brass from Laban "to preserve unto our children the *language of our fathers*; And also that we may preserve unto them the words which have been spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets . . . since the world began, even down unto this present time" (1 Nephi 3:19–20, emphasis added). Therefore, both the brass plates and the Book of Mormon were, according to the latter's self-description, in Egyptian (and not just Egyptian characters).

Despite Hugh Nibley's efforts to make the Egyptian connection palatable,[3] it is wildly improbable. First, it is said that Lehi's family has for generations comfortably used Egyptian, so much so that his family, whose history the brass plates prove themselves to be (1 Nephi 5:14, 16), actually kept copies of the Hebrew scriptures in Egyptian. Centuries before the Septuagint, the first translation of the Bible, and at private initiative, the entire Hebrew canon had been translated! This presupposes that by this date a canon in fact existed—a proposition to which few biblical scholars would give credence. But no less implausibly, it asserts that Lehi's family had gone to the trouble and expense of translating or having others translate the canon into Egyptian and of engraving this enormous translation on brass plates. No serious historian of the ancient Near East can credit such a scenario.

What, then, is the explanation of the Book of Mormon's Egyptian connection? I think the answer lies in an incident in the early history of the translation. In February 1828, Joseph Smith had let Martin Harris borrow a transcription of some characters and their "translation" to have their accuracy verified. Harris took the transcription to Professor Charles Anthon, a noted classicist at Columbia University. In Joseph Smith's 1838 history, Anthon is reported to have identified the characters as "Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyriac, and Arabic" (Joseph Smith—History 2:64).[4] According to this account, Anthon also certified the correctness of the translation. While we may well doubt this latter claim, Anthon may have ventured to identify the nature of the characters.[5] The Book of Mormon

itself, in a classic case of prophecy after the fact, suggests that Anthon ventured no translation (2 Nephi 27:9–20). Martin Harris would appear, perhaps willfully, to have taken Anthon's remarks on the transcription as a vindication of Joseph's translation. In any event, what Anthon may have said off the cuff Martin Harris took as gospel truth. A leading scholar had identified these characters as Egyptian; therefore that is what they had to be. Joseph Smith undoubtedly found this identification useful. Perhaps already wondering what the Book of Mormon language was to be called, Joseph Smith now knew a credible response for the curious and incorporated it into the subsequent text. Henceforth, if anyone should ask from what language the Book of Mormon had been translated, Joseph could say "Egyptian," and could cite Anthon's "expert" testimony to that effect. Indeed, he could parry all such questions by having the Book of Mormon itself proclaim its Egyptian origin. It is interesting that at each of the two beginning points in the translation (1 Nephi and Mosiah; I'll explain what I mean by this later on) the Book of Mormon advertises itself as a translation from Egyptian. The Book of Mormon's Egyptian connection, born in an off-the-cuff remark by Charles Anthon, can thus be explained by reference to Joseph Smith's experience rather than to an ancient source.

The Egyptian connection is, of course, incidental to the basic story of the Book of Mormon, which Joseph already knew by the time Harris visited Anthon. Still, it has important implications for our assessment of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon as an ancient text and also for our understanding of what was involved in Joseph Smith's "translation."

PROPHECY AND THE ORDER OF TRANSLATION

THE Book of Mormon, as is well known, is a collection of three distinct compositions: the so-called "small plates" of Nephi (1 Nephi–Words of Mormon), Mormon's abridged history of the Nephites (Mosiah–Mormon), and the history of the Jaredites (Ether). It is from the second of these that the Book of Mormon gets its name. The reason Mormon chose to include Nephi's record with his abridgment was to preserve Nephi's extensive prophecies about the coming of Christ (Words of Mormon 1:4). Beginning in 1 Nephi 11, for example, Nephi foretells Jesus' birth to a virgin in Nazareth, his miracles, the appearance of John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism, and his death. Nephi reveals that the Messiah's name will be Jesus Christ (2 Nephi 25:19), and that he will be crucified and rise after three days (v. 13). Nephi predicts the natural disasters preceding the coming of the resurrected Christ to America, as described in 3 Nephi. He sees Jesus' visit to the survivors and the twelve New World apostles whom he selects (1 Nephi 12; 2 Nephi 26). These last prophecies are of especial importance. There could be no doubt for anyone who subsequently read Nephi's record that the resurrected Jesus would appear in America.

It is therefore surprising that in the early part of Mormon's abridged history prophecies about the advent of Jesus say nothing about his coming to America (see Mosiah 3:5ff.; 7:27; 15; Alma 4:13; 5:50; 6:8; 7:7ff.) Not until Alma 16:20 is it clearly stated that Christ would appear there: "Many of the people did inquire concerning the place where the Son of God should come; and they were taught that he would appear *unto them* after his resurrection" (emphasis added).[6] The people's uncertainty, shared significantly by Alma himself (7:8), implies that nothing was known about a promise that Christ would visit America, as described in such detail by Nephi. The discrepancy between the prophetic material in 1–2 Nephi and that in Mosiah through Alma 16 cries out for explanation.

As in the case of the Egyptian connection, a credible explanation is found in the story of how the Book of Mormon was translated. In June 1828, 116 pages of translation, virtually everything that had been done up to that point, disappeared after being lent to Martin Harris. For some time thereafter, Joseph was forbidden to translate, and, though perfunctory efforts began again in the autumn, nothing substantial was produced until the arrival of Oliver Cowdery in April 1829. When translation began again in earnest, instead of redoing what had been lost, Joseph apparently continued from the point where the 1828 translation had stopped, with Mosiah, and proceeded to the end of the book, and then translated the first part of the book (1 Nephi through Words of Mormon). This reconstruction of the order of translation is based on the handwriting analysis of the "dictated" Book of Mormon manuscript carried out by Dean Jessee.[7] Jessee tentatively identified the handwriting of John Whitmer and of an additional unknown scribe in the first fifteen chapters of 1 Nephi, where, had Joseph and Oliver begun there, we should have expected to find Oliver's hand. We know, however, that toward the end of the translation in June 1829 John Whitmer briefly acted as scribe. Mosiah and Alma, then, antedate 1–2 Nephi in order of transcription and translation.

With this in mind, it is not difficult to explain why the prophecies of Jesus in Mosiah and Alma 1–16 show no awareness of Nephi's prophecies of Jesus' American ministry. The explanation is simply that during the initial stages of the new 1829 translation, from the beginning of Mosiah to Alma 16, Joseph Smith had not yet conceived the story Christ's visit to America. The ignorance of Nephi's prophecies manifested by the characters in Mosiah and Alma 1–16 reflects the fact that Joseph Smith, the creator-translator, did not yet know what turn the narrative was to take. Nephi's unambiguous prophecies of Christ's coming to America reflect the fact that they were translated, or, as I now prefer to say, composed after the events they claim to foretell were composed.

This is not the only instance where the order of translation has substantively affected the Book of Mormon. One of the striking things about 1 and 2 Nephi is the relative dearth of prophecies relating to the immediately succeeding history of the Nephites and Lamanites—this in stark contrast to the abundance of prophecies dealing with events subsequent to the end of the Book of Mormon period proper. Thus, for example, 1 and 2 Nephi predict the European discovery of America, the persecution of the Indians, the translation of the Book of Mormon itself, the loss of the 116 pages, the Charles Anthon incident, and the three witnesses. From the perspec-

tive of subject matter, therefore, 1 and 2 Nephi continue the narrative left off in Mormon. The disproportionate attention these books bestow on prophecy and especially prophecy relating to modern events contrasts with their disinterest in the more immediate future of the Nephites and Lamanites, and strongly suggests that it was the purpose of 1 and 2 Nephi to outline God's continuing influence in American history after the close of the Book of Mormon era. In other words, having finished the story of the Book of Mormon as he had originally intended it, Joseph Smith continued the narrative by addressing topics of subsequent (modern) history when he returned to deal with the gap left in the book by the loss of the 116 pages. The resulting text was necessarily prophetic rather than historical in nature, as Joseph was describing events that would transpire only after the Book of Mormon chronicle had been closed.

LDS readers who have noticed the two different genres that characterize 1 Nephi through Words of Mormon and Mosiah through Ether will perhaps observe that one need not resort to historical criticism to explain the difference; the Book of Mormon itself tells us that the "small plates" of Nephi were deliberately written to preserve prophetic rather than historical detail (cf. 1 Nephi 9:1ff.). All this necessarily means, however, is that the early Book of Mormon's turn to prophecy was deliberate. The existence of a separate set of plates devoted to matters prophetic is, I think, demonstrably a device created to explain how new source material had turned up to replace the lost 116 pages, and why this new material focused on prophecy at the expense of history. The Book of Mormon itself provides the strongest reason for regarding the small plates as a literary fiction: nowhere in Mosiah to Mormon is reference ever made to a separate set of small plates. What the Book of Mormon record keepers pass from generation to generation is simply called the plates of Nephi, without ever a hint of separate historical and prophetic collections. There is a single set of plates called the plates of Nephi that is maintained right down to the end of Book of Mormon history (for example, Mosiah 28:11, 20; Alma 37:2; 44:24; 3 Nephi 5:10; 26:11; 4 Nephi 19, 21; Mormon 1:4; 2:17–18) and that is valued for its sacred as well as historical content (Mosiah 1:2 with vv. 6–7; Alma 37:2; 3 Nephi 26:7, 11).

Another reason for regarding the existence of the small plates as a literary fiction is the peculiar way in which they are linked via the Words of Mormon to the rest of the Book of Mormon. The most striking thing about the Words of Mormon is that it is supposed to be Mormon's last words: "And now I, Mormon, being about to deliver up the record which I have been making into the hands of my son Moroni. . . . Wherefore, I chose these things to finish my record upon them. . . . And now I, Mormon, proceed to finish out my record . . . " (Words of Mormon 1:1, 5, 9). What, then, is this editorial intrusion doing in the middle of the Book of Mormon? If, indeed, Words of Mormon is Mormon's valedictory, then it belongs at the end of his abridgment, not at the end of the plates of Nephi. If, as Mormon says, his own abridgement had already been completed, what need is there for these transitional verses about King Benjamin, since they link not his abridgment of Lehi's record but Nephi's self-contained account to the beginning of Mosiah? In my opinion, there is no choice but to accept that Words of Mormon is nothing other than Joseph's attempt to knit the two parts of his translation together, while explaining how it was that he so providentially had something like a duplicate of the lost translation.

Joseph's sensitivity to the problems connected with that loss are apparent in the preface to the 1830 edition, which explains that he has substituted Nephi's record for the lost material, and implicitly, therefore, that no one should expect the translations to match exactly. He thus is protected from the charge of fraud, should the two translations ever be compared. Concern about such a charge is made explicit in Doctrine and Covenants 10:10. Despite this caveat, one is entitled to suspect its motive. If Joseph were ever confronted with the lost material, and it failed to match up with the new translation, he could simply have asserted that it had been altered. Does he save face any better by coming up with an altogether different production? Is he not just as vulnerable to the charge of fraud on account of his having deliberately avoided this test of his prophetic ability by "translating" a different work?

First Nephi through Words of Mormon, therefore, prove to be an epilogue to the Book of Mormon proper, not only in terms of order of composition but also in terms of subject matter. These books are implicitly recognized as such by the fact that a new set of records has to be conjured up to explain their appearance.

MUCH more could be said about the effect of the order of translation on the development of the Book of Mormon narrative, but I'll limit myself to just one last example. The key to this case is the fact that nowhere in the Book of Mormon's many detailed prophecies of the last days is anything ever said about the establishment of a new church in the latter days. The nature of God's latter-day work after the appearance of the Book of Mormon is very vague, strikingly so after the detailed prophecies pertaining to Joseph's involvement in the translation.[8]

Not surprisingly, then, while Nephi foresees the rise of a "great and abominable" church following the apostolic era, he says nothing of the Great Apostasy as Mormons understand that term today, that is, the utter elimination of the legitimate church of God. By the same token, nothing is said of the Restoration, again in the global sense in LDS use today. The Book of Mormon portrays cases of apostasy in every era, as well as restorations. But these are localized events. Joseph Smith, as he is portrayed in the Book of Mormon, is not the prophet of the Restoration, but the translator of the Book of Mormon. He is a seer rather than first elder. Joseph's calling, as described in the Book of Mormon, is connected solely with the Book of Mormon. He will be a "Moses" (2 Nephi 3:6ff.) in that his book will play an important role in the gathering of Israel. The powers promised to Joseph are those necessary for its production (v. 11). He is called a seer, and Joseph in fact used a seer-stone during parts of the translation. He is to have "judgment in writing" (v. 17). The "great and marvelous work and a wonder" (2 Nephi 27:26) that was to come about in the last days was nothing more than the Book of Mormon. The

phrase also has this specific meaning in those early sections of the Doctrine and Covenants that preceded the publication of the Book of Mormon (D&C 4:1; 6:1; 11:1; 12:1; 14:1). After that, and still almost a year before the Church is founded, references to a "marvelous work" cease.

Accordingly, it would appear that concrete plans to found a church came to Joseph Smith either after the translation of the Book of Mormon or in its last stages when the incorporation of additional prophecies may have proved too difficult. Perhaps the notion of the need for a new church arose during Joseph's intense involvement in prophesying his own role in the Lord's latter-day work. While one must use arguments from silence with caution, the unusual detail of Book of Mormon prophecies concerning Joseph Smith's life, foretelling as they do his name (2 Nephi 3:15) as well as every major event in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, is our surest reason for regarding this silence as significant. On reflection, in fact, the silence makes sense. Little if anything in Joseph Smith's experience up to 1829 would have led him to think about founding a church. One looks in vain, for example, in his 1832 and 1835 diaries for any evidence that his 1820 vision or his interviews with Moroni had led him to expect his subsequent role as Church leader. The same is true, surprisingly, even of the 1838 account.[9]

Given the Book of Mormon's silence on the possibility of a new church, how can one explain what I call the handbook of church government found in chapters 1–6 and 8 of Moroni? These chapters epitomize church government in telling how one is initiated as a member, how the sacrament is administered, who governs the Church, etc.—all basic issues of church administration, and all conveniently gathered together as if to instruct would-be church builders. If, as suggested by the manuscript evidence, 1 and 2 Nephi were composed after the remainder of the Book of Mormon (including Moroni), why is nothing more said about the appearance of a new church, such as appears to be adumbrated in Moroni?

One possibility is that while Moroni 1–6 and 8 do indeed function as a handbook, they were intended not as the basis for a new church, but as a guide to be used in the reformation of existing religious institutions. If so, it would have been the Book of Mormon itself as much as anything else that contributed to the reform. And, the Book of Mormon need not portray Joseph Smith as playing a pivotal role as church reformer, much less founder.

A more radical explanation would be that Joseph Smith, in fact, composed Moroni after 1 and 2 Nephi. While I do not necessarily favor this explanation, I offer the following pieces of evidence in its defense. First, it was toward the end of the translation (June 1829) that Oliver Cowdery began working on what we now call section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants, known to have been begun in 1829.[10] This suggests that the idea of a new church was beginning to exercise Joseph's mind. Second, if we exclude 1 Nephi through Words of Mormon and also Moroni, and if we restore the 116 pages of Mormon's abridgement, the resulting book is in fact a book by Mormon, that is, the book as it was perhaps originally conceived in Joseph's mind—the work of a single author. The loss of the 116 pages dealt this conception and Joseph's vision a blow. While Joseph was eventually able to recover his gift, the structure of the Book of Mormon would have to change. Above all, the 116 pages would have to be replaced. The fact that Joseph did not immediately act to provide a substitute text suggests that he may have needed time to consider its ramifications: best perhaps to finish the story as he had already envisioned it and address the replacements later. All of the additions (Ether, 1 Nephi–Omni/Words of Mormon, and Moroni) in this scenario come toward the end of the translation process. The complex story of large and small plates and multiple authorship is thus explained in simple fashion as the consequence of accident on the one hand and theological development in Joseph's mind on the other. Hence the succession of insignificant record keepers from Jacob down to the time of Mosiah is required only in order to fill up the chronological gap between the end of the founding family's story and that of Mosiah, the two Almas, and the Nephite wars.

IN saying that the church handbook is unique I do not claim that the concerns it treats are not addressed elsewhere in the Book of Mormon; some are, some are not. What is unique is that the resulting guidelines are assembled in one location, in what is obviously a manual of instruction. Each of the topics taken up in the handbook were matters of debate in Joseph Smith's time, which explains why they are treated at all.

Many readers of this article will recall Alexander Campbell's dictum that the Book of Mormon includes "every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years." Joseph Smith, according to Campbell, "decides all the great controversies—infant baptism, ordination, the trinity, regeneration, repentance, justification, the fall of man, the atonement, transubstantiation, fasting, penance, church government, religious experience, the call to the ministry, the general resurrection, eternal punishment, who may baptize, and even the question of freemasonry, republican government, and the rights of man."[11]

The matter of infant baptism, which heads up Campbell's list, is broached for the first and only time beginning in Moroni 8:4—part of what I've called the handbook. That Moroni would now address this matter is puzzling, since the Nephites had been practicing baptism at least since Alma the Elder's time (Mosiah 18:10ff.). How is it that only at the end of Book of Mormon's thousand-year history does the question arise? By way of comparison, although there is no trace of it in the New Testament, infant baptism was nevertheless an established practice by the late second century, demonstrated by the fact that Tertullian advocated that children not be baptized as infants, for fear they would sin before they could reasonably be expected to act differently.[12] It is also mentioned by Irenaeus, and is an apparently normative albeit localized practice.[13] The issue can scarcely have been avoided by the Nephite church during its long history. Nevertheless, Moroni 8 implies that the issue is altogether new: Mormon and Moroni are initially at a total loss for a response. Even with his thorough knowledge of Nephite history, Mormon has to go to God himself for an answer (v. 7). Mormon's justification (v. 8) is a curious pastiche of New Testament sentiments torn from context, in a manner not uncharacteristic of the rest of the Book of

Mormon. His quotation of Jesus to the effect that "the law of circumcision is done away in me," is the most peculiar. This Pauline sentiment makes sense in its original social setting—the struggle to establish the independence of the gentile Church from Jewish ritual—but what relevance does it have to Moroni's practical difficulty? In fact, the problem faced by Paul could scarcely have arisen in the Book of Mormon world, since Nephite leaders had all along championed the ultimate rejection of the Jewish "Law" in terms that could fairly be called anti-Jewish. The problem of infant baptism, therefore, cannot realistically be located in the sort of world that the Book of Mormon itself would lead us to expect. But in Joseph Smith's world the issue was very much alive. Presbyterians, the most popular group around Palmyra, held with Calvinism that baptism as a sign of conversion was not necessary as a means to salvation. It was not administered to infants. Methodists, the next largest group in the area, required infant baptism. Baptists, also well represented, of course held that only believers should be baptized, and thus excluded children from the rite. Universalists allowed baptism in any number of forms, but held that it was not mandatory in any event. The Society of Friends (Quakers) did away with sacraments altogether. One could, therefore, find among major religious movements in the area just about every possible attitude toward baptism. The key to understanding Moroni 8, and many of the other passages discussed in Moroni's handbook, is the reference to "disputations" (vv. 4-5), which these revelations are meant to quell. Curiously, this late reference is the only hint of such disputations in the Book of Mormon. But reference to "disputations" makes great sense in the context of New York revivalism.

How one deals with infants is obviously not the only controversial point about baptism. We should, therefore, expect that if Joseph had set out to settle matters of controversy once and for all he would address himself to other points of debate. Third Nephi 11:22 begins to do just that. It, too, is introduced by the key word "disputations" (v. 22, also 28ff.), which again are unanticipated. We often hear of political dissension in the Nephite camp, but nowhere previously is anything said about disagreements among the faithful about how baptism should be done. Third Nephi leaves nothing to speculation. Every word and action is specified in detail. Christ himself—what better authority—makes its necessity and scope very clear. This is important, since the New Testament lacks such explicit divine instruction. The uncertainty, which this no doubt evoked in the minds of seekers after the "primitive church," could only thus be completely dispelled. Such explicit instruction fills a definite gap in the New Testament picture of the Church.

Similarly missing from the New Testament are exact details about the administration of the Eucharist (the Mormon sacrament), which are, however, obligingly supplied by 3 Nephi 18. Verse 34 explains that this is again because of disputations. However, in this case, we should expect no disputes at all, since the Eucharist only comes into being with Jesus' advent. Nevertheless, the exact significance of each act is, as in the earlier cases, carefully spelled out (vv. 7, 11).

Having already chosen twelve disciples to govern his church, Jesus next gives the disciples power to bestow the Holy Ghost (v. 37). This almost completes the rudimentary framework for church organization. All the Church lacks is a name, which is providentially supplied in chapter 27. Once more, the motivation is "disputations" (vv. 4ff.), but again, mention of these squabbles comes with no apparent context, except upstate New York revivalism. Anyway, why couldn't the leader of the Church have simply requested revelation on the matter, putting an end to debate? In theory that should be quite enough. But coming directly from Jesus' mouth this statement can no longer be questioned. That is the reason for its importance to Joseph Smith. It provides what the New Testament does not: explicit details from Jesus himself for the organization of the Church. The church "handbook" of Moroni 1–6, 8, then, epitomizes 3 Nephi's more important administrative concerns (the ordination of the Twelve, the mode of baptism, the manner or administering the Eucharist, the authority to bestow the Holy Ghost). Unlike 3 Nephi, however, Moroni's handbook is explicitly designed for "some future day" (Moroni 1:4). With such perfect instruction, the primitive American Church operates without any disputes at all (4 Nephi 2). This idyllic church is an extreme form of what New Testament scholar Robert Wilken calls the "myth of Christian beginnings.[14] Eusebius expresses it concisely:

> Until then [the early second century] the church had remained a virgin, pure and uncorrupted, since those who were trying to corrupt the wholesome standard of the saving message . . . lurked somewhere under cover of darkness. But when the sacred band of the apostles had in various ways reached the end of their life, and the generation of those privileged to listen with their own ears to the divine wisdom had passed on, then godless error began to take shape through the deceit of false teachers, who now that none of the apostles was left threw off the mask and attempted to counter the preaching of the truth by knowledge falsely so called.[15]

"Eusebius wrote a history," writes Wilken, "in which there is no real history, for there is no place for change in his portrait of Christianity. The true church always remains the same from generation to generation. . . . There is no genuine history, for there can be no history. . . . The history of the church is a history of an eternal conflict between the truth of God and its opponents."[16] Although they make different uses of it, this myth is basic to Protestants and Catholics alike, and, needless to say, to Mormons as well. It is precisely this image of pristine Christianity as one supposes it must have existed under the apostles that underlies 4 Nephi. It is, of course, also the prototype for the primitivist model described in 3 Nephi and explicitly recommended for later implementation in Moroni 1–6, 8.

One consequence of this notion of unchanging faith is that diversity cannot be tolerated; the only way of explaining differences is to say that divergent views contradict or oppose the true faith. If there can be only *one* way of doing things, then "disputations" are necessarily a sign of trouble in the Church. By attributing his handbook for the Church to Jesus, Joseph Smith establishes that one way beyond dispute. One solution

to sectarian squabbles, the one ultimately chosen by Joseph Smith, was to establish a new church based on the unambiguous constitution of ancient American Christianity. However, as Eusebius demonstrates, the notion of a post-apostolic crisis need not lead to what Mormons would call the Apostasy. It is therefore possible that Joseph's handbook of church government, while ultimately providing the basis for the new Church of Christ, was initially intended as an epitome for emulation by the existing religious institutions of his day.

CONCLUSIONS

I have tried to show how a historical-critical approach helps us to understand the Book of Mormon. Many questions remain, and numerous problems have yet to be discovered and analyzed. I myself have questions about the Book of Mormon that I can't answer. While the scope of this presentation prevents me from discussing all of its implications at length, let me at least broach the one that I'm sure occupies many readers' minds. If Joseph Smith is the author of the Book of Mormon, is he then a fraud, or is the Book of Mormon the result of revelatory experience (something maybe like *A Course in Miracles*)? At present, I have no compelling answer and am willing to entertain either possibility.

Either way there are serious implications for my faith. One thing I would stress, however, is that as a Mormon I'm not unique in facing such historical critical challenges to belief. Christians of other denominations and Jews have struggled with them for at least two hundred years. They're hard for any educated person to avoid, for historical criticism, science, and religious pluralism have fundamentally altered the way we all view religion. In the West we now universally regard religion as a matter of personal choice. People speak of their "religious preference," often not realizing just how unusual it is, historically speaking, to have such a choice. In most periods of history, in East or West, that freedom has been minimal or non-existent. The freedom to choose, expressed in a profusion of different religions, is part and parcel of the pluralistic society to which we belong. As a result, none of us can escape the awareness that our religious beliefs are not shared by the majority of our fellow human beings. Most of us, at some point, must choose to believe (or not to believe), perhaps in spite of what others think.

The necessity of personal choice is what Peter Berger dubs the "heretical imperative."[17] The essence of heresy is choice: that is what the Greek word *hairesis* means. Implied, of course, is that you choose to believe something of which the majority disapproves. But the majority is now much less monolithic than in earlier ages. There are, if you will, a multiplicity of majorities, and we are free to pick a world view with which we feel comfortable. By the standards of the medieval church, therefore, we are all heretics, because we all assume that it is up to us to choose what we believe.

Freedom to choose can be a frightening thing because it means that we are individually responsible for what we do. The realization of this freedom can, therefore, lead to profound unease. One response to such unease is fundamentalism, which seeks to drown out the voice of freedom by ever more strident denials of the existence of legitimate alternatives. But the fundamentalist is not thereby rid of the annoyance of modernity. The denial of modernity is the mainspring of the fundamentalist's zeal.

For those who choose to believe, there is, according to Berger, an alternative to fundamentalism. It is a chastened belief which recognizes that certainty will always elude us, and that that is a part of life. We choose to believe, though we cannot know for sure what the end of our faith will be. Such a faith accepts that much, perhaps all, of what we cling to as support of our faith is subject to change. But, in Berger's view, the proper response to constant change is not to abandon religion altogether, but constantly to redefine what faith means. This defining process necessarily leads to different results for everyone.

In the wake of my own encounter with modernity, in which historical study of the Book of Mormon has played a decisive role, my religious journey has embraced Berger's process of redefining faith and I find myself in places I never before considered. My life is richer, even as my belief grows more uncertain.

NOTES

1. Note in passing that only in Mormon 9:32 is the Egyptian said to be "reformed." Otherwise, the Book of Mormon's designation is simply "Egyptian."

2. The anachronistic reference to "Jews" is worth noting, but remains tangential to the present discussion.

3. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 13–32.

4. According to W. W. Phelps, no doubt quoting Harris in his 15 January 1831 letter to Howe (*Mormonism Unvailed*, 1836, 273), Anthon is said to have described the transcription as "short hand Egyptian."

5. In the preface to his *Classical Dictionary* (1825), Anthon shows some acquaintance with Champollion's treatise. Even so, his ability to translate anything must have been minimal, to say the least. It is therefore doubtful that Anthon in fact ventured a translation. Anthon himself denied having authenticated Joseph's translation. His two versions of the interview, occasionally at odds with each other, are discussed in Richard Bushman's *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984, 88), where further literature is also given. However, Anthon may have ventured to identify the provenance of the characters. The reason for thinking so is that Harris's description of the figures as "short hand Egyptian" reflects a knowledge of current Egyptological terminology, of which Harris could not have been aware. Champollion's *Précis du Système Hiéroglyphique* I:18, 20, 355) describes hieratic as *tachygraphie*, which is in fact rendered "short hand" in the American review of Champollion's work (*American Quarterly Review*, June 1827, 450). Anthon is known to have been familiar with this piece (*Classical Dictionary* 4th ed., 1845, 45), and he is the only known source from which Harris could have learned this usage.

6. A general designation of the Nephite people is intended.

7. Dean Jessee, "The Original Book of Mormon Manuscript," *BYU Studies* 10 (Spring 1970): 259–78.

8. The one post-translation event that does appear in prominence is the gathering of Israel. But the gathering of Israel is seen not as the response to a new church but as the effect of the Book of Mormon gospel, which was to prepare people for an imminent second coming. Cf. John A. Clark: "[Martin] said he verily believed that an important epoch had arrived—that a great flood of light was about to burst upon the world . . . that a golden Bible had recently been dug from the earth . . . and that this would . . . settle all religious controversies and speedily bring on the glorious millennium" (*Gleanings by the Way*, Philadelphia, 1842, 223). Harris's statement does not, of course, necessarily represent Joseph's point of view, but it is entirely consonant with the stated purpose of the Book of Mormon (cf. e.g., 1 Nephi 14:7; 2 Nephi 27:26ff.; 28; 29; 30).

9. See Dean Jessee, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984).

10. Lyndon Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo: Seventy's Mission Bookstore, 1981), 126, n.3.

11. Alexander Campbell, *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon* (Boston, 1832), 13.

12. Tertullian, On Baptism xviii (trans. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869], 252f.).

13. II, xxii.

14. Robert Wilken, *The Myth of Christian Beginnings* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).

15. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.32.7–8 (quoted in Wilken, 71).

16. Wilken, 73.

17. Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (New York: Doubleday, 1979).