

FROM THE EDITOR

PONDERING HEARTS



By Elbert Eugene Peck

I VIVIDLY REMEMBER the moment on my mission when I read the title of a new Church pamphlet, *Read the Book of Mormon, It Can Change Your Life*. Sweet memories embraced me: teenage campfire discussions about King Benjamin's call to service; sobbing, born-again repentings after viewing Pageant; "warm fuzzy" BYU lectures; and an overwhelming experience of Christ's love and forgiveness while meditating on 3 Nephi. I loved the Book of Mormon because it *had* changed my spiritual life for the good.

In the intervening years, I have come to approach all scripture less literally, although it is still a deep, spiritual well. Last year while teaching gospel doctrine, the classroom conversations challenged me to wrestle with the traditional approaches to the Book of Mormon. In struggling to share honest views and teach inspirational lessons, I addressed the fruitful but historically evasive question, "What life does this text call us to live?" I found profound answers that, once again, called to my spirit and changed my life. As a spiritual primer, the Book of Mormon billows my spiritual coals and kindles a fire that warms my world-weary soul, burns away my impurities, and lights my mind. It is a text worthy to build a religious community on. I testify that the Book of Mormon is of God.

Still, it is a text produced by mortals. And, while secondary to the book's spiritual life, exploring the interplay between divine and human interests me, profitably. Perhaps my tolerance level for divergent ideas is abnormally high, but, frankly, I am baffled at the finger pointing, testimony challenging, and anti-Mormon labeling of "revisionist" Book of Mormon scholars by more traditional scholars. I don't share their insistence that, if a scholar has a testimony, his or her conclusions must confirm long-held assumptions. Since we don't have final answers to the current battles about the book's nineteenth-century elements, I take a let-it-play-itself-out attitude, trusting in the meantime in God's relentless spiritual calls to individual reform. Joseph Smith brought forth the Book

of Mormon by the "gift and power of God," but just how that gift operated in him is less clear. God's acts are fused with human elements; nothing is purely divine. Similarly, I suspect the Gospels don't contain Jesus' exact words; more likely, they reflect the faith-filled understanding of first century Christians. Thankfully, God's spirit brilliantly shines through human texts and acts.

In contrast to identifying the divine, scholarship addresses earthbound, human truths by encouraging never-ending insightful, correcting responses to opposing ideas. Making space for, but not necessarily accepting, divergent views is essential to progress. Because scholars' conclusions are incomplete, ever-changing approximations about human actions, they should not be the core of one's faith. The Spirit's tug to a holier life is independent of scholarship.

The response to the differing First Vision accounts by Joseph Smith illustrate the strengths and limitations of human knowledge. In the 1960s, some felt the multiple versions threatened the Church, and the texts were suppressed. It took scholars time to understand what some saw as the prophet's duplicity. They grappled with human memory, storytelling, and Joseph's evolving self-understanding—all of which revised or expanded understanding of Joseph, God, and ourselves. In the meantime, missionaries still taught the Joseph Smith story, with the Spirit's witness. There are still unresolved discrepancies, but the once-banned narratives have been published, even in the *Ensign*, with no harm.

The turn-around time by scholars on the First Vision narratives was short. After more than a century, New Testament scholarship is still an infant. With the Book of Mormon, our current studies only survey the fields to be cultivated. Can we wait patiently for that harvest of understanding? Can we say: "These are perplexing questions. Let's pursue them, but not get overexcited about interim conclusions. In the meantime, we'll continue as a community with the task of Christian

living that the text calls us to do." Some hard questions can only be answered after dramatic societal changes or new intellectual methods develop. Conversely, one generation's hot questions are a later's irrelevancies.

We're an inquisitive people, but, paradoxically, we're overprotective, too. At BYU, I heard clandestine reports of Rodney Turner's locked-up study on women and the priesthood; apparently the stuff was too hot for the general Church. Since then, the discussion on women has made Turner's relatively tame treatise an historic relic. It's now on the open stacks. What was the big deal?

Similarly, subscribers call inquiring about underground items and say, "It's too dangerous for you to publish, but please fax me a copy." We can take the hard stuff, but our neighbor can't? What is our fear of public discussion? I'm suspicious of such who-know elitism: a democratic access to knowledge is essential to a healthy community.

Faith is patience. If we really believe in something, we will work for it and wait for its realization in its own time. Impatience is lack of faith: prematurely forcing an outcome to quell doubt. With faith, we can let unsettling ideas simmer, percolate, age, unfold, and weather. Yet, that slow, crock-pot process affects our spirituality, too, usually for the good. For example, pondering how Brother Joseph may have blended his own world view with God's revelation has challenged me to consider the same human/divine alloy in blessings I have given or in interpretations of pivotal spiritual experiences. Whatever the truth about Joseph's process, my ponderings have brought insights into my spiritual life, my ability to clearly hear or speak for God, and of God's tolerance of my hubris.

Apparently, taught by angels early in his life, Jesus intimately foreknew his entire ministry. But, like the rest of us, his mother had no such luxury. After the events in the infancy narratives—angels, shepherds, startled wise men, and a virginal conception—Mary had a testimony that Jesus was God-called, but she probably didn't know what it meant. "But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart," wrote Luke. (2:19.) Anchored by her faith, she still must have watched with unsettling perplexity her son's life unfold, her hopes and assumptions constantly being revised against the hard facts of his unpredictable life, death, and resurrection. Years after the Ascension, she probably was still sorting it all out, coming to new insights that changed her understanding of her faith. We need Mary's kind of open, pondering faith today. 