

## O N T H E R E C O R D

# THE WRIGHT EXCOMMUNICATION DOCUMENTS

## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

**A**LMOST A YEAR before his 5 April 1994 excommunication for publishing his belief that the Book of Mormon is a nineteenth-century text, Brandeis professor of Near Eastern Studies David Wright recorded the following in his journal: "Last night [27 April 1993] I met with the bishop of my ward for about two hours. About two weeks ago, the executive secretary called to set up an appointment. He did not know and therefore could not tell me what the meeting was about. So I stewed for two weeks. It could have been about the article I recently published in *SUNSTONE*, it could have been about . . . my daughters . . . storming out of their Young Women's meeting at Ward Conference a couple of weeks ago when a high counselor . . . denigrated gays and said they should not be allowed in the military (and when my daughters were subsequently questioned about their testimonies by a stake Young Woman's [sic] leader in the women's rest room), it could have been about our family's not attending church so regularly in recent months, or it could have been planning for [one son's] ordination and [another's] baptism which are to occur in July. Well, it was about the *SUNSTONE* article. . . ."

The article, "Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in the Search for Religious Truth" (*SUNSTONE*, Sept. 1992), originally presented to the B. H. Roberts Society in early 1992, marks one of the few times Wright—a returned missionary and graduate of the University of Utah and Berkeley—had spoken publicly about his Book of Mormon beliefs since his dismissal from BYU in 1988 over that and related issues. (After being fired from BYU, Wright went to Jerusalem on a Fulbright Scholar Research Award, then taught at Middlebury College in Vermont before settling at Brandeis in 1991.) Bishop James Reeder interviewed Wright at the request of the stake president, who had been contacted by a general authority concerning the *SUNSTONE* article. Bishop Reeder determined that Wright's beliefs were "apostate." When the question of Wright's sons' baptism and ordination came up in July, Bishop Reeder determined that Wright, who had not altered his views, was not worthy to perform the ordinances. A friend stood in for Wright, and shortly thereafter the Wright family stopped attending Church meetings.

Wright's second major public discussion of the Book of Mormon was "In Plain Terms That We May Understand: Joseph Smith's Transformation of Hebrews in Alma 12–13," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* (edited by Brent Metcalfe, Signature Books, 1993), published shortly after the *SUNSTONE* article. In September 1993, Bishop Reeder requested that Wright meet with their stake president, Ned Wheeler. In the interim Reeder had obtained a copy of Metcalfe's

book (which had been widely publicized in an Associated Press article and which Wright had brought to Reeder's attention) and concluded that the stake president should pursue the matter. Although the controversy surrounding the September disciplinary councils for Utah authors made Wright "reticent" to meet with President Wheeler, he did so, and Wheeler encouraged him to "undertake a spiritual discipline so that [he] would become orthodox in [his] thinking."

Hurt by the September excommunications, David declined two invitations in October to meet with his bishop. No further contact was made concerning the issue until February 1994, when Wright declined still another invitation to meet with Bishop Reeder.

Two weeks following this latest invitation, Wright was informed that a bishop's court would be held 20 February to determine what course of action would take place concerning his Church membership. Wright chose not to attend, but sent a letter explaining his position. His wife Dianne sent a letter as well; the two letters were widely distributed and discussed on *MORMON-L*, an LDS electronic discussion network (and are reproduced below). In this larger forum, Wright found both supporters and detractors. "What Br. Wright is really suggesting here is that somehow scholars are above the discipline that regular Mormons face . . . [suggesting] that so long as you can footnote your views they must be somehow correct. If the criticisms of Br. Wright are correct then can there be such a thing as apostasy at all?" wrote one *MORMON-L* participant. Surprisingly, perhaps, Wright garnered some support from members of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (F.A.R.M.S.), which had issued a 500-plus page response to Metcalfe's book. The *Salt Lake Tribune* quoted BYU professor and F.A.R.M.S. editor Daniel Peterson as calling Wright's position "intellectually incoherent," adding that although he didn't "want to see this middle position dominate, . . . I am not eager to throw its advocates out of the church."

The bishop's council was featured on the front page of a local Massachusetts newspaper, and Wright explained his reason for not attending the meeting: he saw his case following the patterns of the September excommunications and as an attack on the dignity of his scholarship. The article quoted President Wheeler as suggesting Wright could have faced excommunication for refusing to attend the bishop's council. Further, the stake president said the "whole purpose of a disciplinary council is to help a person see the error of their ways. We want to help heal people. But if they don't want to discuss it, that certainly says something, doesn't it?"

Bishop Reeder moved to take the matter to the stake president and high council, but allowed an informal meeting between Wright, a counselor in the bishopric, and a friend from the Wright's ward. Wright was informed that his wife's letter to the bishop's council had sparked a desire for more open communication between all parties concerned. This and a subsequent meeting were followed by a 29 March meeting among Wright, the bishop, and the stake president. Wright later recalled that after two hours of discussion it had become "clear that I could not satisfy [their] requirements for membership in the Church." When President Wheeler asked how Wright felt about the previous year's meetings with leaders, "I told him that [the meetings] had been spiritually abusive and that they had dissipated what faith I had." Convinced the meeting would lead nowhere, Wright rose, shook their hands, and prepared to leave. "I asked the stake president if he was going to take action to do so quickly," he recalled. "Two days later I received notice of the stake disciplinary council." Wright defended himself before that body on 5 April, along with Dianne Wright, and Stephen Thompson, an LDS Egyptologist from Brown University. On 9 April, Wright received a letter informing him he had been excommunicated for apostasy. The charges against him included his dis-

*To be orthodox, David would have to say that the evidence he sees in the scriptures is not there. In other words, from his viewpoint, he would need to lie.*  
—Dianne Wright

belief in some Biblical events (including a literal flood and Tower of Babel) and contradicting the opinions of modern prophets. "When our Prophets speak in their office and calling, they will be directed by inspiration and when they speak as such all debate should stop," President Wheeler wrote. "Careful attention through fasting, prayer and scripture study will reveal the truth of these things to you and help you to regain full fellowship for which we deeply desire."

Wright's excommunication is the seventh in a series of nationally publicized sanctions against LDS intellectuals and feminists.

The following documents outline his case in greater detail; they serve as a case study of conflicting Mormon world views—firmly rooted but radically different beliefs both parties feel are born of the Spirit. To Wright, Mormonism's claim to embrace all truth makes space for scholarship that cuts against orthodox norms; to Wheeler, the fundamental principle of the gospel is unquestioning obedience to authority, something Wright's pluralistic vision by nature resists. We hope this case study will facilitate a greater understanding of the dynamics involved in recent Church conflicts.

## A WIFE'S WITNESS

DIANNE WRIGHT'S LETTER  
FOR THE 20 FEB. 1994 BISHOP'S COUNCIL

*Wright's wife argues that in order to deny his conclusions, he would have to lie. Rather than force this dishonesty, the Church should be willing to include diversity.*

February 20, 1994

Dear Bishop Reeder;

I would like to speak in behalf of my husband, David. As I think about this situation, I realize that none of you know either David or myself. A few of you may have spoken to us three or four times, but none of you know us as people. None of you understand Biblical scholarship, which is the basis of the events that have brought David to this court. I cannot imagine how in a few short hours you can even begin to understand either David or his arguments. Without this understanding, it is impossible to make a righteous judgment.

Given this reservation, I will attempt to help you understand David.

David is an honest conscientious scholar. His honesty is

more important to him than his own personal comfort. David cannot say that there is evidence to support something just to make people like him or even to protect his membership in this church. David's beliefs are based on a careful, detailed study of the scriptures. To be orthodox, David would have to say that the evidence that he sees in the scriptures is not there. In other words, (from his viewpoint) he would need to lie.

David's honesty has cost him dearly. He was fired from BYU because he had the courage and honesty to tell a vice president of BYU his beliefs. David's beliefs are founded on thousands of hours of detailed research. These conclusions did not come easily for David. The church is a great part of his identity. To be a scholar of

integrity one must hold to truth above all else.

This church was founded on the search for truth by Joseph Smith. Joseph used every means available to him to find truth. Indeed, one of the great joys we have on this earth is our quest to find truth.

David has spent much time and devotion in his quest for truth. His journey will continue for the rest of his life. He will use every resource available to him to find it.

To many of you, his search is evil because it does not come to orthodox conclusions. However, can this church really claim to be the only true church and cast out an individual for his sincere search for truth? Is scholarship a problem in the church? I believe with all my heart that scholarship does not need to be a problem. Scholarship will enrich our understanding as well as give us challenges. However, the church will be made much stronger by facing these challenges honestly.

The real problem in the church today is the growing intolerance toward people who don't fit into the orthodox ideal. Intolerance breeds hate. Hate will destroy the church. We need to love and respect each other

more. We need to realize that there is more than one way to be a good Latter-day Saint. Some of us find God by listening and obeying others. Some of us find God by asking questions and then searching for the answers to these questions. Still others are compelled to help the needy. God created all the diverse people of this great world, and he loves all of us. Each of us can serve God in our own way. We do not need to be Mormon clones in order to have unity. Diversity will make us a stronger healthier people. We do not need to all think alike in order to be Jesus' disciples.

The Savior told us how to know if we are his disciples:

By this shall all men [and women] know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. John 13:35

We all need to be more tolerant and loving of people who believe or understand the gospel in a little different way. You may not understand David or his scholarship, but you can help Mormonism become the great religion I have always believed it to be by allowing us the freedom to think about God and search for him in our own way.

Sincerely,

Dianne T. Wright

## A YEAR OF CONFLICT

DAVID WRIGHT'S LETTER  
FOR THE 20 FEB. 1994 BISHOP'S COUNCIL

*Wright chronicles his conflicts with the Church, then outlines his questions about the legitimacy of disciplinary actions against scholars.*

February 17, 1994

Dear Bishop Reeder:

I received with sadness and frustration your letter notifying me that a disciplinary council will be held against me for apos-

tasy. It grieved me that I was about to be pushed out of my spiritual and cultural home for my honest and sincere scholarly thought and expression which were motivated by my care for

the Church. I am not sure that I will attend the disciplinary council because I have great reservations about its propriety and moral legitimacy. In this letter I want to explain my understanding of the factors and events that led to the present charge and then outline my reservations about the proceedings.

The chain of events began with our meeting on April 27, 1993. In this meeting you said that a general authority had contacted the stake president and had asked him to inquire after me because of my article "Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in the Search for Religious Truth," published in *Sunstone* (16/3 [September 1992; appeared February 1993] pp. 28-38). The stake president delegated to you the responsibility of contacting me. In the meeting you showed me a copy of my *Sunstone* article which you said Church headquarters had sent the stake president. Your judgment at that time was that my ideas were apostate. Your main interest was encouraging me to become orthodox in my thinking so that a disciplinary council wouldn't be necessary.

We met again in a formal way July 11. This meeting was to determine if I was orthodox enough to perform the baptism of my eight-year-old son and the priesthood ordination of my twelve-year-old son. You asked me a list of questions, mainly about the priesthood claims of Joseph Smith. I expressed my views positively but felt it necessary to put my answers in the context of my theological thinking that had grown out of my studies. You denied the legitimacy of my theological reconstructions. You said that I could not perform the ordinances if I did not have a conviction of the traditional understanding of the matters about which you questioned me. You said it would be hypocrisy to perform the ordinances without that conviction. Our family went ahead that month with the ordi-

nance work because we felt it was important. I was not asked, or allowed apparently, to participate in the ordinance work either as an official witness or as a silent participant in the confirmation and ordination circles. My family and I ceased going to Church at this time because we felt hurt and marginalized by events to this point.

Our next contact was September 19 when you called and asked me to meet with the stake president that day. I was reticent to do so because at that time in September six other scholars and thinkers in the Church were being brought up in disciplinary councils. I met with the stake president. He indicated that there was no particular impetus from the Church hierarchy for this meeting with him. It seems that your acquisition of the book *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (ed. B. Metcalfe; Salt Lake City: Signature, 1993 [appeared May]) which contained my article "In Plain Terms that We May Understand: Joseph Smith's Transformation of Hebrews in Alma 12-13" (pp. 165-229), which I had told you about in earlier meetings and which the stake president said you had purchased, was what precipitated this particular meeting. The stake president basically urged me to undertake a spiritual discipline so that I would become orthodox in my thinking.

As the decisions came down about the six scholars and thinkers at the end of September (one disfellowshipment and five excommunications), I decided out of principle that I did not want to be a party in the investigation of my scholarship, which had the goal in part of condemning it and implicitly condemning me for it. I did not want to be involved in a situation of negotiations with the Church in which it thought it could put pressure on individuals for their scholarly pursuits.

In October your secretary

called to arrange a meeting with you. I told him that I preferred not to meet. You called a few days later, on October 28, to arrange a meeting. I said that I preferred not to meet. Though we did not set up an appointment, we spent several minutes discussing matters on the phone. You confirmed that the discussions with me since April had come by general authority instigation and that the goal of our meetings and discussions was to lead me to change my historical and related views or suffer disciplinary action. You reiterated that you viewed my publications as apostate. You said that my publications were not scholarship because they did not support the Church's traditional teachings.

No further contacts were made until February 2, 1994, when your secretary called to set up a meeting between me and you. I declined for the same reason as before. He said that you did not call me personally because you did not want to get into a conversation over the phone about the issues, but that you preferred to meet face to face. About February 6, a counselor in the bishopric called to ask if I had objections to my son being called to the deacons' quorum presidency. I said it was up to my son. He said that he would get back in contact with my son in about a week. On February 13 your representatives delivered the notice of the disciplinary council set for February 20 at 4:00 P.M.

The content of the discussions just described and the nature of our interaction over the past year leads me to the conclusion that the charge of apostasy is based mainly on my publications. I also suppose that my unwillingness to meet with you and to a lesser extent my not attending Church for the past six or so months are also considerations.

The foregoing chronology has alluded to some of my reservations for meeting with you as part of a Church investigation of

my scholarship and ideas. I want to add to these and make clearer my view why I think such investigations are improper, morally questionable, and even destructive to the Church.

First of all, scholarship is not some sort of sin, a "failing of the flesh," which an individual recognizes to be an error and which that individual considers to be a blemish to his or her personal integrity. Scholarship, rather, is a constructive activity and is one of the purest expressions of a person's character. Scholarship involves a failing of the flesh, paradoxically, only when one is not forthright with his or her conclusions, when one holds back evidence, when one dissembles about his or her views in the face of social or ecclesiastical pressure. To express one's views, especially when they fly in the face of tradition, in other words, is hardly a sin but rather a virtue. Because Church disciplinary proceedings treat scholarship as if it were sinful, and even employ along the way the polemical myth that sin is what is responsible for a scholar's unorthodox views, the proceedings are an attack on the individual's integrity.

Another objection I have is that these proceedings are a matter of killing the messenger for the message. In my articles I discussed evidence that suggests that some traditional understandings of Mormon history and scripture are in need of revision. The sorts of difficulties I discussed are real. Many scholars have recognized them. And many members of the Church have accepted nontraditional solutions to them similar to mine. The questions and evidence cannot be pushed out of view or made innocuous by disciplinary actions. It is necessary for these issues to be talked about openly and the discussion should go forth without threat of punishment. Punishment especially should be avoided when scholars, such as I, have tried to be constructive. I have had no desire whatsoever to injure

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—David Wright

our—my!—religious tradition and community. My only desire has been to be honest with regard to the evidence as I have seen it and suggest how this may be viewed positively within our tradition. I would urge you to reread my articles with an eye open to my positive assertions and solutions. You may not accept them, but a positive and constructive attitude is there.

Another reservation I have about these proceedings has to do with the connectedness of my Mormon studies with my professional activity and thought. I am an assistant professor of Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern studies at a highly respected university which is committed to freedom of scholarship. There I teach courses on the Hebrew Bible, on ancient Near Eastern history, and on the languages and thought of the peoples of the ancient Near East, and I conduct research in these areas. The views expressed about the Bible in my articles that you have read are the things that inform all of my professional research and are things that I teach my students every day. My views about Joseph Smith's scriptures have grown out of this and prior professional activity and preparation. The Church's investigation of my scholarship is an indictment of and attack on my profession and scholarship at large. It is an attack which will contribute to the characterization of the Church as anti-intellectual.

The Church learned several years ago to leave certain controversial professions alone, such as the biological and earth sciences, and let them go their way. That is why one can learn about evolution at Brigham Young University from teachers that accept the concept as valid (I hope this is

still the case). Along this line, you yourself said in our first meeting about my publications that you preferred to see scholars go about their work and let that work succeed or fail by peer review and the ongoing process of discovery. I wish that the Church would adopt this perspective in regard to the study of ancient history and religious literature. If it has objections to a particular conclusion, it need not discipline its proponents but simply say that the conclusion is not Church doctrine.

I also question the propriety of the investigation of scholars because the process contradicts some basic Church principles and values. We value free agency. But these proceedings, since they are implicitly coercive, strike at the heart of this principle. The Church, too, values truth. We say that we accept truth from wherever it comes and claim in our scripture that the "glory of God is intelligence," a motto hanging at the gates of Brigham Young University. But investigating and disciplining scholarly activity effectively denies this profession. Mormonism also respects the constitution of this land and even views it as inspired. But disciplinary proceedings against scholars implicitly mock the freedoms enumerated in that document. While the Constitution does not require that religious institutions hold to its principles, great dissonance arises when a member is allowed freedom of expression and conscience outside of the Church but is denied it inside the Church or with regard to Church issues. There is no little irony in the Church's sacrifice of these traditional values to go after scholars when their conclusions are not traditional.

My final point is a reiteration

of something I have said to you before in our conversations. Action against scholars and against other constructive thinkers threatens the faith and commitment of members of the Church just as much as any of the things that scholars and thinkers may say or publish. Indeed, because these actions are conducted by the Church leadership officially, greater consternation may arise. I have heard reports from and about friends and relatives, very orthodox in their perceptions, that they are disturbed at the Church's actions against thinkers over the past year. The actions have the ostensible goal of bringing scholars and thinkers into obedience to Church leaders. But the result is more questioning of the validity of the leaders' authority among the membership.

I conclude by stressing that my membership in the Church is valuable to me. I stress also that my scholarly work on Mormon matters has grown out of concern for the Church and has been guided by commitments I made to contribute constructively to the Church and its life. I have

also been guided by the Church's desire to seek after knowledge and understanding. I hope that commitment to this search will not be used to push me out of my community or to place me in its margins. I had hoped over the past several years as I have kept track of the Church's attitude towards scholarship, and experienced the effects of that attitude personally, that the Church would become more tolerant. The reverse has been the case. It is a dark time, but I still hope for a day when tolerance will increase and unity in our tradition will be gauged, not by uniformity, but by a willingness to work together for a common good in a context of individual diversity.

Sincerely,  
David P. Wright

P.S. I have included some publications that will help you set the investigation of my scholarship in the larger context of actions against scholarship in the Church. I hope you can read this material before you make any decisions in my case. Please pass it on to the stake president.

## RESEARCH REQUEST



WANTED:

MATERIAL (OFFICIAL OR PERSONAL) RELATING TO ACADEMIC FREEDOM OR WOMEN'S ISSUES AT BYU FROM ANY TIME PERIOD, BUT ESPECIALLY 1985–PRESENT.

CONTACT: BRIAN KAGEL OR BRYAN WATERMAN  
SUNSTONE 331 S. RIO GRANDE, SUITE 206  
SALT LAKE CITY, UT 84101 801/355-5926

## THE MATTER IS TEMPORARILY TABLED

WRIGHT'S MEMO TO 20 FEB. 1994 BISHOP'S COUNCIL  
AND LETTER TO WRIGHT FROM 20 FEB. 1994  
BISHOP'S COUNCIL

*Wright decides not to attend the bishop's council.  
The bishop, disappointed by Wright's refusal to attend the council,  
decides to refer the matter to the stake president.*

February 20, 1994

Dear Bishop Reeder:

After serious consideration and prayer, I have decided not to attend the disciplinary council today. I cannot negotiate what cannot be negotiated, my God-given right and ability to think and discover. It is a sad day when those committed to discovery and truth are forced to stand away from the Church. It is a sad day when the search for truth must be pursued outside the Church.

Sincerely,

David P. Wright

February 20, 1994

Dear Brother Wright,

As you know a Disciplinary Council was held in your behalf on Sunday Febrary [sic] 19, 1994 [the meeting occurred 20 February] at 4:00 P.M. in the Littleton First Ward.

We were disappointed in your decision to not attend. We did receive your letter along with that of your wife. We appreciate you both taking the time and effort to

share your thoughts and feelings in this matter. Your letters were read in the council.

I know that this has been difficult for you. I assure you that you were not put on trial through any court procedure [sic]. The disciplinary council as defined by the Lord is a council of love where all who attend participate in council and instruction with the purpose of being edified and inspired to Come unto Christ; to be perfected in Him.

The decision of the Council was to adjourn [sic] and refer the matter to the Stake President. We also thought it would be helpful to arrange less formal meetings with you to further discuss this matter.

I will be calling you for an appointment. I want you to know of my respect, love and concern for you and your family. I encourage you to work with President Wheeler and I to resolve this matter.

Sincerely,

James B. Reeder  
Bishop

## PRE-COUNCIL CONCERNS

WRIGHT'S LETTER TO PRESIDENT WHEELER  
PRIOR TO 5 APRIL 1994 COUNCIL

*In anticipation of his upcoming disciplinary council, Wright again outlines his concerns about the court's appropriateness.*

March 31, 1994

Dear President Wheeler:

I write this letter because I feel the need to reiterate or bring up some matters that you should have in mind as you consider terminating my membership.

First I want to apologize for leaving somewhat abruptly

Tuesday night, when I stood up in our conversation, shook your hand, wished you well, and then departed. After two hours of meeting with you and the bishop, however, it became clear that I could not satisfy your requirements for membership in the Church, namely, to cease

speaking and publishing ideas (and perhaps also to recant my already published ideas) that did not wholly agree with what the president of the Church has spoken in his prophetic office (which would include, as I gathered from our conversation, views expressed in First Presidency missives, the prophet's General Conference talks, and other such official communications). You convinced me—at least made me existentially resigned to the fact—that I did not belong in the Church. My interest in the search for truth conflicted with your demands for obedience. I had to follow my inner convictions and the authority of my heart; I could not surrender them to the demands of external authority when it seemed unreasonable.

I realize the importance of loyalty in an organization like the Church. But I do not believe loyalty requires a member to give up her or his pursuit and perception of the truth and to be silent especially about problems that require solution for the benefit of the community. Loyalty requires each individual to use his or her talents to build the community. Free expression, even if what is said is not exactly on the mark, is necessary for friendships and relationships to develop that will give strength to the group. Requiring conformity to authority and silence when views differ breeds various reactions including self-doubt, fear, resentment and suspicion. These can only weaken the community. Repression, in my view, creates a weight which can only doom a society or organization to collapse.

Since BYU let me go in 1988–89, I have decided to speak out about my historical conclusions for the benefit of our community. I thought (and still think) that Mormonism would become stronger by discussing these issues. I tried to avoid unbridled speculation and to deal with what I considered to be concrete and significant facts. I offered what in my view were

carefully considered conclusions. In other words, the problems I addressed with regard to the Book of Mormon and other scriptural works were (and are) real and required (and still require) rigorous logical answers. My excommunication will give only brief illusory satisfaction that the problems have been addressed. Other scholars in and out of the Church will bring them up and treat them, and the problems will remain in the public eye. It seems that the Church would do better having its members trying to make sense of these difficulties, even experimenting with some radical perspectives, rather than adopting an [sic] *de facto* obscurantist position and pushing those who would like to offer a constructive solution out of its midst.

Related to this is your argument in our Tuesday meeting that if a common member or investigator read my work and saw my conclusions he or she might think that, since I am a member, my view is right and cease to believe in Mormonism. I am one who believes that logic, reason, and spiritual experience and convictions motivate people in their beliefs, not mere authority. I doubt that people will really adopt a view about the Book of Mormon like mine if they have convictions or evidence otherwise. On the other hand, if my arguments are reasonable, they will continue to be effective even after I am excommunicated. This is to say, it is a specious reason to excommunicate me because it is feared that people will adopt my conclusions because I am a member of the Church.

I should note that while you fear that people will lose their faith because of my conclusions, I have heard by letter or conversation from several individuals who said their faith was buoyed by my work. They saw that a scholar in the Church could deal with these issues critically and find a solution that allowed him or her to have faith that Joseph Smith was a prophet and that

*You convinced me—at least made me existentially resigned to the fact—that I did not belong in the Church. My interest in the search for truth conflicted with your demands for obedience.*

—David Wright

Mormonism was inspired. These individuals had run into the same sort of evidence as I and were struggling to find a paradigm of faith that allowed them to make sense of the evidence in a logical and rigorous way. As Mormon scholars are expelled from the Church for their honest faith-conserving attempts to make sense of the evidence, these perplexed members and those who will certainly come across the difficulties in the future will only be able to conclude that Mormonism is uninspired and cannot be their home.

Apart from those who recognize the force of evidence of the type I have raised, the excommunication of scholars affects and will affect the faith of their family members, their friends, and other members of the Church who are interested in matters of scholarship in a more general way. People's senses of freedom and fair play are offended by discipline of those seeking after truth. I have read or heard about complaints from some of the most orthodox Latter-day Saints after the disfellowshipment of one and excommunication of five scholars and feminists last September. These orthodox members raised questions about the legitimacy of the Church leaders' actions. Again, these are not scholars or exercised thinkers; these are common ordinary Latter-day Saints who have no particular interest or connection to liberal thought and publications in Mormonism. You need to realize that the further excommunication of scholars will create further distrust of the leadership among the membership of the Church.

Another point to be made is that I do not believe you are as familiar with the intellectual life of members in the Church as may be required to make an informed

decision about my case. I feel I am being judged in a theoretical vacuum. There are many LDS scholars who are writing things which, if one were to make a close investigation, would not square with the (or a) Church president's own official expressions to a greater or lesser degree. These scholars, at BYU and elsewhere, are generally not persecuted, certainly not excommunicated, for their views. There are bishops and stake presidents in the Church who even defend people with views such as mine rather than disciplining them. I feel that if I had moved into another stake I would not have been treated this way. Thus for me there is gross injustice in your actions. I hope that you will become familiar with the intellectual and religious diversity in the Church. You can read SUNSTONE magazine and the journal *Dialogue* to get a sense of this diversity.

In connection with this I also believe that you (including the bishop and the high council) do not have the competence in historical and textual analysis to appreciate the conclusions that I have made. I feel that I am being judged by a jury not composed of my peers. Certainly you have the ability to line up my conclusions against what the prophets have said and decide objectively if my conclusions are consonant or dissonant. But peer judges would also recognize that the evidence that I interpret is significant and would realize that it cannot be simply ignored with a demand for obedience. Their judgment, I think, would be mitigated by their realization that some freedom for working through the evidence must be given. Daniel C. Peterson, who is an Islamicist at BYU, who supervises some of the work of FARMS (Foundation for Ancient

Research and Mormon Studies) which argues for the antiquity of the Book of Mormon, and who himself believes in the antiquity of the Book of Mormon, said in a *Salt Lake Tribune* article (Saturday, February 19, 1994) about my case: "I don't want to see this middle position dominate (that Joseph Smith composed the Book of Mormon but that the book is still scriptural, my, D. P. Wright's, position), but I am not eager to throw its advocates out of the church." Professor Peterson is someone I would consider a peer and what he says here is significant.

I recognize that you will use this letter to convict me. But know that my expressions here come out of the moral depths of my heart. The meetings and disciplinary actions bringing my scholarship into ecclesiastical question and your implicit requirement that I give up my conclusions to remain a member of the Church has injured me deeply. To retain integrity I must oppose this inquiry. To use a phrase that was used to entitle a

collection of essays by Václav Havel about resistance to totalitarianism, I must "live in the truth,"<sup>1</sup> the truth as I see it, not as someone outside of me sees it.

I appreciate your and the bishop's concern. I believe that you are acting with integrity out of your understanding of truth. I know that you do not have personal animosity towards me but are pursuing your stewardships in the way you see proper. I respect you for this.

I hope the Church will learn from its mistakes and move forward to forming a more inclusive society. I hope for the day where the Church will allow the individual pursuit of knowledge and not consider this a sin, something worthy of disciplinary action.

Sincerely and cordially,  
David P. Wright

<sup>1</sup>Václav Havel, *Living in Truth* (ed. Jan Vladislav; London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1987). See especially the essay, "The Power of the Powerless" (pp. 36–122). [Footnote part of letter.]

## QUESTIONS AND ULTIMATUMS

### WRIGHT'S SUMMARY OF 5 APRIL 1994 DISCIPLINARY COUNCIL

*Wright documents the council's events—the witnesses' testimonies, the council's interrogation, the stake president's admonitions—the outcome of which is his excommunication.*

The disciplinary council was scheduled for 7:30 P.M. I arrived at the Nashua New Hampshire stake center about 7:20, with my wife Dianne, Jill Keeley, a close family friend, and Stephen Thompson, a friend and witness for the evening. I found the stake president and told him that, when appropriate in the meeting, I had a statement to read along with some letters from sup-

porters and that Stephen Thompson, a Mormon with a doctorate in Egyptology from Brown University, and my wife, Dianne, had witness statements to present. He said this would be fine.

We stood in the foyer as the high council met and prepared for the trial. My bishop, James B. Reeder, waited with us. I heard the clinking of metal passing

around the room from outside the door. Apparently they were choosing lots to decide which part of the group was going to act in my favor and which part was going to act in the interests of the Church.

About 7:40 or so the bishop and I were invited into the high council room. We walked to the head of the room and took our position in chairs against the wall by the head of the table where the stake presidency stood and around which the high council was standing. They immediately dropped to a kneeling position for prayer and I followed. The prayer, given by a counselor in the stake presidency, I believe, included a request that things be done right and that we communicate and do so without anger.

After the prayer, the stake president advised me of the charge. He told me simply that I had been judged to be in apostasy. He asked me if I agreed with the charge. I said that I did not believe I was guilty of apostasy. He asked me to present my defense at that point. He did not lay out any evidence against me for the group. Later in the meeting one high council person, when questioning me, stated that the high council had not heard about the matters of this case before that evening. All that the group seemed to know was whatever the stake president might have said in a few minutes before I entered the meeting, from whatever I said in my defense, and from whatever arose during questioning later in the meeting. I began my defense by reading a statement outlining my spiritual and intellectual journey.

After this, I read six of several letters that supporters had sent to the stake president, copies of which I had received. I read these to give the stake president and the group a sense that many in the church were concerned about this case and that it was something that affected many others in the church.

Stephen Thompson came in next to give his witness state-

ment. He read from a letter which he had sent the stake president earlier. His point was that there were several in the church who had come to conclusions about the Book of Mormon and other scripture similar to mine and that the evidence was not negligible. His and my intent was to help the stake president understand the larger context of Mormon scriptural scholarship and that people who have these views are not necessarily unfaithful. There were no questions for Stephen when he was finished with his statement.

My wife Dianne then was brought in. She read her short statement with emotion. She defended my character. "I have known my husband for eighteen years. . . . I have never known him to lie or to be unkind to anyone. If I would fault him with anything, it would be in being too honest. I have known him to spend long hours studying, weighing evidence and trying to help members of the church understand the Old Testament, the other scriptures and history of the church. I have found David to be a model husband and father." She also spoke of how this affects our children and the Church in general: "How do I teach our children that God and this church are correct when they see their father excluded from God's kingdom because he told others what he believed. Is this going to make them feel like telling others about what they believe? How can we trust the church and feel comfortable in it when it is willing to expel someone we love, a sincere seeker of truth, because the church is worried about its missionary work? . . . A true church is not just one that has some true answers, but it is one that is constantly seeking more truth." When Dianne finished, she was excused. This was the end of my formal presentation.

The council at this point began to question me. This lasted from about 8:30 to 10:10. The stake president went first, fol-

lowed by his counselors and then the high councilors. Since I did not take notes in the meeting (I assumed from what I knew about other disciplinary cases that I couldn't take notes), what is portrayed in the following is imperfect. Nevertheless, it comes from notes and journal entries I made after the council that night and the following day.

The stake president was mainly concerned that I trusted scholarship above the prophet. I told him that the scholarly evidence was not easy to dismiss. Because of it I did not think that prophets were infallible. Individual members should have the right to pursue their talents and offer their constructive observations for the benefit of the Church. What I had striven to do was try to find a way to believe and assert faith rather than reject the Church altogether.

This led him to make the point that if the Book of Mormon were not ancient, God would be a liar. I tried to make the point that I did not view matters that way. I reiterated my view of revelation given in my opening statement, that revelation required interpretation by the human prophets and that this interpretation brought in the limited and sometimes erroneous perspectives of the prophets' humanity. I also reiterated what Stephen Thompson brought up, that Jesus used fictional stories for teaching and that the "story" presented in the temple endowment ceremony was fictional. In other words, Mormon theology already had precedents for unhistorical scripture. I also noted, for his theological perspective, that in D&C 19 God admitted to deceiving people, or better, being rhetorically ambiguous. He lets people think that "endless torment" and "eternal damnation" means punishment that lasts forever, rather than punishment coming from him, the "endless" or "eternal" one. He uses this rhetorically, "that it might work upon the hearts of the children of men, altogether for my name's

glory."

In President Wheeler's questioning about God's deceit he asked about the Noah and flood story. In my meeting with him a week before I told him that I did not believe the flood story and several other Bible stories, such as the creation and the Tower of Babel, were historical. This is why he brought up the flood issue in the disciplinary council. He said that if the flood story weren't historical, God would be a liar. "Why didn't Jesus tell Joseph Smith that the flood wasn't historical?" he asked. If it weren't historical, God would have told Joseph Smith. This question revealed to me the extent of the stake president's conservatism and lack of knowledge about the scholarly study of the Bible. When he asked this question, if I had any thoughts of succeeding that evening, those thoughts fled.

I was asked sternly by a high councilor if I would "sustain" (or, as he explained the term for me, "obey") the stake president if he came out of his deliberations and asked me not to publish anymore. I said I would not give up my right to do research and speak and write about it. Scholars need to be free to search and discuss responsibly. Another reason why I said I could not give up the right to publish was that the stake president's question about the flood implied that even my professional work, in which I question the historicity of a number of events in the Bible, would be proscribed.

The stake president asked me if I thought God could withhold information from us. He said that God often holds back information from us, such as the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon; he doesn't give us everything. He said also that God also gives prophets extensive knowledge, but forbids them to tell the saints all that they know because the saints are not ready. He used this to argue analogically that God and the prophet as his representative could ask us as members

*He asked about Noah and the flood. He said that if the flood story weren't historical, God would be a liar. When he asked this question, if I had any thoughts of [reconciling our differences], those thoughts fled.*

—David Wright

not to reveal the knowledge that we knew or discovered, including our conclusions from scholarly study. He asked me if I agreed with this perspective. I said that the information about the Book of Mormon is there in the Book of Mormon; God gave us the Book of Mormon with all the problematic information in it. Therefore the basic problem and evidence is not a matter of secrecy. I argued that we have the opportunity and responsibility of making sense of this information.

The stake president also spoke about the duty of members of the Church to represent Christ (and hence the prophet). Because of this, a member could not publicly express ideas different from what the Church believes.

I was also asked the following questions by the stake president or others in the council: (1) Did I believe the gold plates were real? I said that I did not have a definite answer. I explained that some of the witnesses' statements and their larger religious experiences suggest that the plates may have been experienced spiritually rather than objectively. I compared the parchment of John in D&C 7 which was spiritually perceived. (2) Did I believe that the personages that Joseph said appeared to him really did appear to him? I said that I believed Joseph was sincere in his descriptions. I said that I wasn't certain about their ontological reality; I did not deny nor affirm this. My view of revelation allowed visionary and auditory phenomena to be part of the human interpretation of revelation. (3) Do I keep my temple covenants? I hesitated wondering to myself if wearing garments is a temple "covenant" or just a rule outside the specific covenants one makes. Viewing it

as the latter, I answered "Yes." But upon further thought after the meeting, I should have answered "No" if paying tithing is viewed as part of the covenants or if being willing to give one's life for the traditional Church doctrinal structure is a necessary attitude. (4) Do I keep my baptismal covenants? I asked what the questioner meant specifically. He said it means to remember Jesus. I answered "Yes" to this. (5) I was asked how I thought about Jesus. I asked what was meant specifically. The questioner asked if I saw his atonement as a means of salvation. I answered, "In my way of understanding it, yes." (6) One high council member asked if critical study might lead one to conclude that Jesus wasn't the literal son of God. I said that historical scholarship can't easily solve or treat matters that are purely in the divine sphere which I thought this matter was. (7) How do you feel about prophets? I said I consider them wise and instructive individuals but not infallible. Individual members in the church can and should offer light through their studies and experiences. (8) The stake president asked, "Do you believe that Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others were prophets?" I answered affirmatively. After thinking about this and receiving his letter following up the disciplinary council, I think he was really asking me whether I believed these individuals existed. (9) A high council person asked: "Why do you want to be a member of the Church?" I answered that it was spiritually valuable to me. I also said that my identity was formed by my Mormon upbringing and my family going back several generations is Mormon. I see Mormonism as something more

than just a system of doctrines. It is a society of people which is beneficial to me and my family. (10) To show my feelings about Joseph Smith, I mentioned that I had reacted adversely to a letter I had recently received from a conservative Christian saying that he was happy I saw Joseph as a fraud and charlatan. I told the council that I wholly reject this conclusion and perspective. Later in the discussion this was brought up against me. A high council person said the critics of the Church are learning about my scholarship and are going to use it against the Church. (11) How would I feel if I became orthodox and traditional in my perspectives and learned that a youth had read my older critical scholarship and had lost faith because of it? I answered I would probably be distressed. But I added that several have been helped in their faith by my work and at the same time many have been hurt in their faith by the simplistic answers or the "unanswers" that leaders and traditional scholars of the Church give to difficult questions.

At the end of the question session, four high councilors were asked to sum up the discussions for the stake president. Two were to speak in my favor and two in favor of the Church. As it turned out, only one spoke in my favor, and the one who did speak in my favor did so weakly. My theoretical supporters were either dead set against me or they were not informed about scriptural scholarship and my way of thinking about religion to offer any cogent arguments in my behalf. I think the latter was the case.

I was excused at this point. The stake president and high council deliberated privately from 10:10 to about 10:55. From

about 10:55 to 11:15 the stake president was apparently in his office in prayer making a decision. During this time I sat in the foyer and heard the high councilors speaking pleasantly and amusingly to one another in the high council room waiting for the stake president to return. The bishop had only been in for the first part of the private deliberations. He came out about 10:30 or so and waited in the foyer with us. He made the comment to a person in my party that "the call was pretty much the stake president's." This was not a new datum; it is what the *General Handbook of Instructions* lays out as proper decision making procedure. After the stake president returned to the high council room and, apparently according to the *Handbook*, after he asked the high council to sustain his decision, I was invited back in.

All were standing as the bishop and I walked to the front of the room by the head of the table. When we were in our positions, standing in front of our chairs, the stake president and the rest following sat down. The stake president leaned over to me and said something like: "It is our prayerful decision that you should be excommunicated." After this he instructed me not to wear the garments any longer and not to pay tithing. He invited me to come to church. He said that the decision was clearly made known to him, meaning that he had a revelation that I should be excommunicated. He said it was a matter of pride on my part. I needed to learn to subordinate scholarship to what the prophet said. The prophet's words spoken in his prophetic office are not contravenable or liable to revision on the basis of scholarship. He



asked me to “start from the beginning and rethink everything” so that I would get a proper spiritual testimony of the church. He said that he and the bishop want to keep track of my progress. He said that he really loved me and that their decision came out of

love. We had a closing prayer, offered by one of the counselors. When we stood up, the stake president and I shook hands and he hugged me. I shook hands with the counselors and then with some of the high counselors.

## THE DEFENSE RESTS

WRIGHT'S STATEMENT  
TO 5 APRIL 1994 DISCIPLINARY COUNCIL

*Wright documents his personal spiritual and intellectual journey from Hugh Nibley disciple to historical critic. He explains his belief that the Book of Mormon can be scripture, even if it is viewed as a nineteenth-century document.*

April 5, 1994

I had some difficulty in deciding whether to attend this meeting. I didn't attend the bishop's disciplinary council for reasons of principle which I outlined to him in a letter on February 17, 1994. I thought that for similar reasons I would not attend this meeting. But realizing that this is the venue for a final decision and considering the support I have received from members of the Church and colleagues outside the Church, and considering too my responsibility as a member of the Church and as a scholar and teacher to stand up for the right to pursue truth, I have come to speak a few words of explanation and defense.

My defense will consist of giving you perspective on my faith and my scholarship. Twenty years ago I returned from my mission in Oregon where I had decided to pursue a career in ancient Near Eastern linguistics and history. As a result of some reading I had done there, I wanted to become a “Hugh Nibley”—a defender of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon and other of Joseph Smith's scriptural works. I reentered the University of Utah for undergraduate work to begin to realize this goal. During this work, however, I began to encounter evidential inconsistencies that disturbed me in this quest.

Certain bits of data made it look as though the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, and other of Joseph Smith's ancient scriptures were not ancient. I also found evidence that made me sense that some of our larger official views of antiquity were deficient. This presented such a crisis to me that I reacted with a measure of anti-intellectual verve against scholarship and at one point was almost ready to quit my studies to escape the evidence—to put it on a high shelf or on the back burner, to cease asking questions. But my interest in finding solutions to these evidential challenges combined with the spiritual longings of my soul overcame my fear and I decided to persevere.

One of the things that challenged me at this time was not only the conclusions about matters of antiquity by scholars outside the Church, but conclusions by many scholars in the Church, both those in academic as well as leadership positions. I found that many of their arguments defending traditional positions of the Church regarding antiquity were flawed: i.e., they were generally not rigorous and were sometimes illogical and ignored or misinterpreted significant evidence. I sensed that some of this scholarship was written more for public relations purposes than for the advancement of knowl-

edge. It seemed to be trying to bide time with intellectual sidetracking so that a better defense could perhaps be found and made. As I decided to persevere in my studies I was persuaded, intellectually and spiritually, that I needed to be honest with the evidence. Whatever I did, I needed to give the evidence an honest hearing and discussion and when necessary let my analysis of it go in directions that might not be entirely traditional. This did not mean that at this time I had concluded that the Book of Mormon and other ancient scriptures of Joseph Smith were not ancient. Far from it! Indeed, with this recommitment to careful study I also renewed my commitment to defend the antiquity of Joseph Smith's scriptures by this study.

With my renewed energies I entered the graduate program in Near Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. I eventually came to choose the Hebrew Bible as my focus because of my religious interests. My present views about the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's other ancient scriptures came very slowly over the course of my graduate career and despite my desire to see the evidence go the other way. I did not want to admit that these texts were not what Joseph Smith and modern prophets claimed they were. I struggled by doing research and writing papers to myself defending the antiquity of Joseph Smith's scriptures. I read new publications by Hugh Nibley and other defenders of the traditional view and I reread, sometimes several times, the work they had already published. The more I read and studied, however, the severe weaknesses of traditional defenses became more apparent on the one hand and the strength of arguments for seeing these texts as the nineteenth century compositions of Joseph Smith grew on the other. My investigation was not simply an intellectual matter. I spent many hours in prayer pleading for guidance

to find other evidence and for new perspectives about troubling evidence. This prayer buoyed my belief in the scriptural worth of the books, but it never provided refutation of the evidence nor did it weaken its logical effect.

The evidence became so clear to me that a new crisis of faith ensued. My option was to throw away my belief altogether, or to develop for myself a new model for understanding the divinity of Mormonism and the scriptural value of the Book of Mormon and other scripture. Fortunately several of the teachers that I had in graduate school, and many of the biblical scholars whose works I had read, provided personal examples indicating that the critical—meaning the careful historical—study of scripture and accepting nontraditional historical conclusions resulting from this study need not lead one to deny the religious value of scriptural texts. For example, many of my professors were Jewish, and religiously devout, but accepted the critical conclusion that Moses did not write the Pentateuch or Torah (the first five books of the Bible; this is a view, by the way, which is well supported by evidence and is a conclusion I accept, teach, and work with every day in my professional activity). For a Jewish scholar to make this conclusion is the equivalent of a Mormon scholar making the conclusion that the Book of Mormon is not ancient but written by Joseph Smith. Despite these historical conclusions about the Pentateuch or Torah, these Jewish scholars viewed it as the foundation of their religious tradition and devoted much of their work to explicating it and interpreting it in what they considered to be its real historical context. They and a large number of Jews generally viewed their work—their historical critical work—as fulfilling the religious obligation of studying, interpreting, and teaching Torah.

I found that these Jewish, as well as similarly oriented

*I believe that you are acting with integrity out of your understanding of truth. I respect you for this. I hope the Church will learn from its mistakes and move forward to form a more inclusive society.*  
—David Wright

Christian, scholars provided a model that I could employ to escape the requirement of rejecting Mormon tradition. I developed a view of Joseph Smith's scriptural works that allowed me to read them critically and be true to what the evidence indicated but appreciate it [sic] as scripture. I came to see revelation as a more ambiguous matter, involving a significant amount of interpretation on the part of the human recipient of the revelation. I concluded that prophets "translate" revelation into their own words in terms of their cultural situation. Thus a revelation, or rather a product of revelation—a statement, text, etc.—has a certain amount of humanness which can account for error and even misperception on the part of a prophet. This interpretive aspect of revelation for me applied not only to matters of spiritual impression but to visionary and auditory phenomena as well.

When I graduated from Berkeley with my doctorate in Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern studies in 1984, I began my academic career of researching and teaching in biblical and Near Eastern studies. I began at BYU from 1984 to 1989 teaching courses on Hebrew, the Hebrew Bible, and ancient Near Eastern culture and languages; I spent 1989–90 on a Fulbright research fellowship at Hebrew University at Jerusalem studying Near Eastern ritual practices; I was a visiting professor of religion at Middlebury College in Vermont 1990–91 teaching courses on Hebrew Bible and Judaism; and since 1991 I have been at Brandeis University teaching courses on Hebrew Bible and Near Eastern languages, literature, and history. These positions have required and allowed me to pursue re-

search and publish a host of respected works on the Bible and the ancient Near East. I have professional articles in the *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, the *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*), the voluminous *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, *Vetus Testamentum* (a journal for Old Testament study), the *Journal of Biblical Literature* (forthcoming), and several articles in various books on the Bible and ancient Near East. These articles deal with subjects such as, the practice of the laying on of hands in the Bible, the ethical and moral basis of the purity laws of the Old Testament, the concept of holiness in ancient Israel, and the elucidation of various difficult passages in the Bible and Near Eastern texts. I have also published a book which deals with the ancient Israelite concepts of purity and impurity.

This opportunity for teaching and research in Bible and the ancient Near East has allowed me to continue my study of the question of the antiquity of Joseph Smith's ancient scriptures. This work has continued to confirm my sense that these works are not ancient. The view of antiquity presented in these scriptures does not accord well with what is known from scholarship otherwise. Other substantial evidence has, on the positive side, tied these works with a nineteenth century context.

The point of this autobiographical survey is to impress upon you the fact that my views are well grounded in careful study. But more than that. My study and resulting views *grow out of a desire to cultivate faith not disbelief*. Let me repeat: my views

*grow out of a desire to assert and cultivate faith not out of a desire to generate disbelief and attack the Church*. As I have written I have always sought to support faith. Yes, I have been frank in my discussion of matters and have brought up controversial matters. But I have sought to put what I have said in the context of my faith and hope and never to attack the Church. For example, in my article in the volume *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, I write at the end:

Some may think that acceptance of the conclusion that Joseph Smith is author of the Book of Mormon requires rejecting the work as religiously relevant and significant. I append this afterword to make it clear that such a rejection does not follow from this critical judgment. . . . One can adopt an . . . attitude, tempered by the acceptance of critical conclusions . . . , that allows the text to speak a spiritual message. [The Book of Mormon] becomes a "true record," to adapt William James's phrase applied to Jewish and Christian scripture critically read, "of the inner experience of [a] great-souled [person] wrestling with the crises of [his] fate." The Book of Mormon is the apprentice's workshop of [Joseph] Smith's prophetic career. In it we see him becoming a prophet. By careful and critical reading of its chapters against the environment in which it

was produced, we can understand him much more completely and thus appreciate the foundations of the tradition he inaugurated. We can also use this study of Joseph Smith to reflect on our own situations and work out solutions to our questions and problems.

In the article in SUNSTONE ("Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in the Search for Religious Truth") I proposed various ways that I dealt with certain critical conclusions in a religiously positive and supporting way. For example, I explicitly supported the prophets' right to interpret prophecy for our time. Realizing that prophecies were often meant for the people who lived at the time when they were spoken, and realizing that they needed to be reinterpreted and reapplied in ensuing generations, I asked: "Who was to 're-vision' these prophecies of old for the present community, particularly our community? I argued that it was to be those who had the same relationship to the community now as those who first spoke the messages had to their communities, i.e., the community's current prophetic leaders" (p. 33).

Thus you can see that in my writings about Mormon scripture I have been positive, trying to describe the way that I have made sense of the evidence and asserted faith and hope. Indeed, despite the crises that I described earlier, my journey of faith has been exhilarating and stimulating, spiritually as well as intellectually. It's unfortunate that this concern over my faith and thinking has occurred. Faith, of whatever character, needs com-

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—President Ned Wheeler

munity. Fortunately there are other Mormons like me who have responded recently and given me support. My faith has been uplifted by this. But at the same time I have suffered a loss of community through the recent ecclesiastical suspicion and investigation of my honest work. I have not been encouraged by the investigation and discipline of other scholars and thinkers in the Church, particularly last year. I hope that you will allow me and scholars like me to remain in the community so that our faith may continue to grow.

In all my work I have sought to find an avenue for faith. The evidence that I have encountered

cannot be dismissed by a call for obedience. Nor can it be dismissed by prayer. Certainly it cannot be dismissed by a requirement of remaining silent until answers come. Answers will not be had unless the evidence is carefully laid out and various solutions have been offered. This is why I have published my views and why I continue to support publication of such views.

In sum, if I am guilty of anything, it is of trying to find a way to believe and appreciate my religious tradition, of trying to see Joseph as a prophet and to understand his work as spiritually valuable to me, my family, and my Mormon community.

full impact of the statement "by their fruits ye shall know them." Our actions either affect others for good or ill. If we look around us, observe attitudes and actions of our family and associates, we will see the effects of our actions for good or ill upon their lives. This must be weighed against the standards set by the Lord in keeping all the covenants that we have made with Him. We cannot shift responsibility to others for situations that we have created. We must face our problems squarely and determine if our "fruits["] are producing the results that Heavenly Father has ask [sic] of us. The righteous life will always promote obedience to all that the Lord has asked us to do regardless of outside pressures. A true test of our standing before the Lord can be understood by the scripture found in (D&C: Section 29:7) . . . for mine elect hear my voice and harden not their hearts; . . . the righteous fear them not, for they love the truth and are not shaken. (BofM:2 Nephi 9:40)

The Lord would like you to gain an understanding of what it means to accept membership in His church. We represent the Savior and our Prophets and recognize that they alone have the right and authority through inspiration to direct the affairs on this earth. When our Prophets speak in their office and calling, they will be directed by inspiration and when they speak as such all debate should stop. The Prophet is the only person on the earth authorized to interpret the doctrine of the church.

The Prophet Brigham Young taught that we can be deceived by our five senses no matter how real or convincing they may be but that when the spirit bears witness to us, we will never be

deceived. The Lord has given us a test to determine if we are receiving the spirit. All direction by the spirit of the Lord will always be in total harmony with all the scriptures and with all the prophets. If the inspiration does not meet this criterion, we can be assured that our inspiration is not from the Lord but from the adversary.

Great understanding and perspective comes from scripture where we learn that all truth comes through the spirit and that access to the spirit only comes through obedience. This would suggest and is true that a person who is in tune with the spirit through obedience has knowledge far beyond that of the best educated person in the world. This also suggests and is true that if interpretation of gospel principles and scripture is left to those educated persons who do not follow the principles of the gospel, the truth will never be known even though much rhetoric will be pleasing to the carnal mind. All efforts without the spirit present are fruitless and will lead to false and destructive conclusions.

Understand these sobering words found in Mosiah 3:19. "For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father."

A clear understanding that our Prophets and Seers have the authority and privilege to see

## "EXCOMMUNICATED FOR APOSTASY"

LETTER FROM PRESIDENT WHEELER  
REGARDING THE 5 APRIL 1994 COUNCIL

*Wright is found guilty of apostasy and is excommunicated. God would be a liar, the stake president argues, if the stories in the scriptures should not be taken literally.*

April 6, 1994

Dear Brother Wright,

This letter confirms the decision of the Disiplinary [sic] Council on your behalf 5 April 1994. The Decision of the Council was that you be Excommunicated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. You may not wear the temple garments nor pay tithes and offerings. You are strongly encouraged to attend meetings however you may not give a talk, offer a public prayer, partake of the sacrament, or vote in the sustaining of Church officers.

You have the right to appeal this decision to the First Presidency if you feel injustice. An appeal should be in writing and should specify errors or un-

fairness claimed in the procedure or decision. This appeal should be presented within 30 days of the above date to the presiding officer of the disiplinary [sic] council, the Stake President.

The following are areas of concern that have been revealed through inspiration as a result of this disiplinary [sic] council procedure. Careful attention through fasting, prayer and scripture study will reveal the truth of these things to you and help you to regain full fellowship for which we deeply desire.

The Lord loves you and your family very much and wants you to be a forever family. The Lord wants you and your family to go to church and learn to walk by faith. He wants you to realize the

into the future, know the present conditions of the world and people, to interpret the past and give every one of us direction from the Lord. Many times this direction will be in opposition to what the world would have us believe. We must exercise our faith in our Savior and accept this guidance even though it may go contrary to our worldly knowledge. In the end, we will come to know that the Prophets will always be right. Many theories have come and gone at the hands of the best scholars and scientist [sic] only to be superseded, disproved and rejected. A true prophets [sic] words will always come to pass. This is why we must compare our earthly learning to the standard of the gospel and not the other way around. If we are not careful we can be as the scripture indicates, ever learning and never coming to a knowledge of the truth, and even walking in darkness at noon day.

The spirit of inspiration will not give conflicting guidance. When the spirit confirms that the Book of Mormon is true, that same spirit will not confirm that writing in opposition to what the Prophet Joseph has spoken is right. Only the spirit of Satan will do this. Satan is most anxious to take any false doctrine and make it logical and acceptable to the human mind.

It is contrary to the laws of heaven that our Heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ would give guidance and instruction to the Prophet Joseph Smith concerning the bible [sic], the history of mankind, his mission, and mislead or deceive him. This would be the case if certain events or Prophets mentioned in the Bible were actually fictitious.

It is contrary to the laws of Heaven that the Angel Moroni would come and appear to the Prophet Joseph Smith and explain to him that through the Urim and Thummim he would be instrumental in translating the Book of Mormon and then believe that the Book of Mormon

was a 19th century document.

The testimony of the three witnesses and the eight witnesses are true which includes the testimony of the gold plates.

As a member of the Church we covenant to represent the Lord in all things and in all places. This also means that we represent His Prophets. To do this means that we do not run ahead of them in any way to impose our own will or usurp their authority.

Knowledge of things as they really are comes through the spirit and does not depend upon our earthly knowledge to be understood. These things confound the wise and are considered foolishness to many wise and those who are learned.

Satan will take hold of every situation that will bring doubt, generate unbelief, and destroy testimonies of the gospel. Scripture tells us that if we were to offend even one of Heavenly Father's children it would be

better that a millstone were place [sic] about our neck and we were drowned in the depths of the sea. Satan will feed and encourage anyone who pursues this line of thinking. Satan is the master of deceit, the father of lies, the master counterfeiter. We can only be protected by [sic] his insidious work through fasting, prayer, scripture study and keeping every covenant that we have made with our Heavenly Father. To fall short of any of these things would be to open our armor and let Satan into our lives. Satan rewards us no good thing.

The universal sin of pride as described by our Prophet President Benson in the May 89 *Ensign* is part of everyone's life and must be rooted out if we are to be pure in heart and able to see with pure eyes.

May you understand these words in the spirit for which they are intended. Our only purpose is to speak the words given to us by our Heavenly Father's spirit so

that you can understand what the Lord wants you to learn concerning these truths. I testify that the gospel is true, that we have a true and living Prophet, that Joseph Smith is a true Prophet of God, that our Savior lives and atoned for our sins and that our Heavenly Father hears and answers our prayers. You and your family are precious in the sight of our Heavenly Father. I know that whatever the Lord requires of us is right and for our best good. The Lord wants you back into His kingdom in full fellowship. The items listed above have been indicated through inspiration for your benefit. I pray that you may understand their meaning and significance in your life. May you know of our love for you and of our greatest desire to see you return in full fellowship.

Your Friend and Brother,  
Ned Wheeler  
President,  
Nashua New Hampshire Stake



**Some Latter-day Saints believe that when it comes to homosexuality, the glory of God is *ignorance*.**

**Half a century ago "good" Mormons knew nothing about the lives of lesbians and gays. Many still don't. Now, in the wake of new medical understanding and profound social change, that ignorance is no longer virtuous. We offer two publications that will help you learn more about this important subject.**

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## RECENTLY RELEASED

Compiled by Will Quist

This section features recent titles from the Mormon press; the descriptions are often taken from promotional materials. Submissions are welcome, especially for books of LDS interest not by major LDS publishers. SUNSTONE neither promotes nor sells these titles; contact your local bookseller for information about ordering.

## CHRISTIAN LIVING

**Catching the Vision: Working Together to Create a Millennial Ward.**

By William G. Dyer. Bookcraft, hardback, 288 pages, \$13.95.

Covers "fundamental leadership concerns . . . but it is also applicable for families to read together."

**Confronting Abuse: An LDS Perspective on Understanding and Healing Emotional, Physical, Sexual, Psychological, and Spiritual Abuse.**

Ed. by Anne L. Horton, B. Kent Harrison, and Barry L. Johnson. Deseret Book, hardback, 389 pages, \$16.95.

In an LDS context, counsels both the abused and those who seek to help them.

## HISTORY &amp; BIOGRAPHY

**The Church through the Years, vol. 2.**

By Richard P. Howard. Herald House, hardback, 531 pages, \$27.50.

Essays by an RLDS Church historian on different aspects of the church's history.

**Harold B. Lee: Man of Vision, Prophet of God.** By Francis M. Gibbons. Deseret Book, hardback, 525 pages, \$21.95.

About "a man who loved his family, tirelessly served the Lord, and revelled in his association with the youth of the Church."

**The Mormon Church.** By Roger M. Thompson. Hippocrene Books, hardback, 216 pages, \$14.95.

History, beliefs, and practices for the Hippocrene "Great Religions of the World" series.

**Sarah McDonald: "Bishop of the First Ward."** By Peggy Petersen Barton and Drew Barton Quinn. Aspen Books, hardback, 113 pages, \$10.95.

The "unflappable mother-in-law of Elder Mark E. Petersen" appears in this "true story of struggle, spirit, and romance."

**S. Dilworth Young: General Authority, Scouter, Poet.** By Benson Young Parkinson. Covenant Communications, hardback, 338 pages, \$14.95.

Young's grandson's "portrait of an eminent Church leader, lifelong scouter, superb storyteller, and revered family man."

**Who Was the Pharaoh of the Exodus?**

By Jeff J. Williams. Horizon, hardback, 144 pages, \$10.98.

Corrects ancient Egyptian chronology and identifies the pharaohs of Abraham, Joseph, the Oppression, the Exodus, and others.

## SCRIPTURE

**Book of Mormon: 3 Nephi 9-30, "This Is My Gospel."** Ed. by Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. BYU Religious Studies Center, hardback, 270 pages, \$11.95.

Papers from BYU's 8th annual Book of Mormon Symposium, held in 1993.

**Language of the Lord: New Discoveries of Chiasma in the Doctrine and Covenants.** By H. Clay Gorton. Horizon, hardback, 351 pages, \$18.98.

Argues that 224 chiasma (an ancient literary form) in the Doctrine and Covenants are evidence of this book's divine origin.

**Mormon's Story: An Adaptation Based on the Book of Mormon.** By Timothy B. Wilson. Self-published, hardback, 645 pages, \$29.95.

The full, official, and adapted text of the Book of Mormon at the level of young and old readers.

**New Insights into the Old Testament.**

By Allan K. Burgess. Bookcraft, hardback, 184 pages, \$10.95.

Modern parallels and commentary highlight principles in some of the Old Testament's most impressive stories.

**Riches of Eternity.** Ed. by John K. Challis and John G. Scott. Aspen Books, hardback, 256 pages, \$14.95.

"Twelve instructors in the Church Education

System [discuss] essential matters contained in the Doctrine and Covenants."

**Studies in Scripture, vol. 4: 1 Kings to Malachi.** Ed. by Kent P. Jackson. Deseret Book, hardback, 500 pages, \$18.95.

The last of this eight-volume series features essays by "many well-versed scripture scholars and researchers."

**Un-Canonized Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith.** Comp. by Stephen C. Heidt. Oquirrh Mountain Publishing Co., paperback, 48 pages, \$4.70.

"Provide[s] to the general LDS membership the remainder of the *known revelations* of the Prophet [in] a simple compilation."

**Written by the Finger of God: A Testimony of Joseph Smith's Translations: Decoding Ancient Languages.** By Joe Sampson. Wellspring Publishing, hardback, 355 pages, \$17.95.

A scriptural and linguistic defense of Joseph Smith's translations, especially the Book of Abraham.

## THEOLOGY

**Our Destiny: The Call and Election of the House of Israel.** By Robert L. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie. Bookcraft, hardback, 157 pages, \$11.95.

Millet and McConkie discuss the Lord's chosen people in the restored Church.

**Whence Came They? Israel, Britain, and the Restoration.** By Vaughn E. Hansen. Cedar Fort, hardback, 132 pages, \$11.95.

Reviews the "panorama of Israel's dispersion and migrations" through parts of Europe and Asia.

O, Say What Is Truth?  
**LAS VEGAS**  
Affirmation '94

<p><b>WHO:</b> LDS gay &amp; lesbians, their family &amp; friends</p> <p><b>WHEN:</b> September 16-18, 1994</p> <p><b>WHERE:</b> Alexis Park Resort, Las Vegas, Nevada</p> <p><b>COST:</b> \$110; \$90 before 8/1/94; Day rates available</p>	<p><b>SELECTED SPEAKERS:</b> Sonja Farnsworth, Marv Peterson, Lavina Fielding Anderson, Ron &amp; Adonna Schow, Laurie Johnson</p> <p><b>INFORMATION:</b> (702)228-0121 <b>CONFIDENTIALITY IS ASSURED</b></p>
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