



## BOOK OF MORMON MUSINGS



*Whether the Liahona was made by God or left by the wayside by a desert diviner, the effect on the Lehites was the same.*

### OF CURIOUS WORKMANSHIP

*The following is the first in a series of short vignettes on the Book of Mormon; other musings will appear in future issues.*

THE WORD “CURIOUS” HAS SEVERAL DIFFERENT meanings: (1) eager to learn, inquisitive; (2) nosy; (3) oddly interesting; and (4) something done carefully with great skill. The first two definitions—inquisitive and nosy—typically refer to people; the last two—interesting and carefully made—usually refer to objects. Mormons generally do not use the term “curious” in any of its positive senses; this is unfortunate. Curiosity may have killed a few cats, but Latter-day Saints should consider the curiosity of Joseph Smith that led him to pray about the ambiguities of multiple Christian doctrines and churches.

In their testimony, the eight witnesses to the Book of Mormon described the golden plates and the engravings thereon, “all of which ha[ve] the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship.”<sup>1</sup> Their assessment was intended to indicate that the plates appeared to have been made with great skill, but it also applies to the text as translated by Joseph Smith.

The following scripture is my favorite curious Book of Mormon passage:

And it came to pass that as my father [Lehi] arose in the morning, and went forth to the tent door, to his great astonishment he beheld upon the ground a round ball of curious workmanship; and it was of fine

brass. And within the ball were two spindles; and the one pointed the way whither we should go into the wilderness. (1 Ne. 16:10.)

The Book of Mormon assumes that the Liahona (the name later given to the brass ball in Alma 37:38) was a gift from God—perhaps forged by God’s own hands or the hands of an angel. I like the idea that God may have taken an afternoon off to prepare a carefully crafted ball, like a Fabergé egg, with a peculiar, intricate design, perhaps a design that also went well with the decor of Lehi and Sariah’s tent. I also like to imagine that when God made writing appear on the Liahona’s spindles, he got a kick out of watching the Lehites do a double take, much the same way I enjoy surprising our pet cat by producing her favorite toy mouse seemingly from thin air.

The text, however, also permits the possibility that the Liahona might have been made by earthly hands. Some intriguing attempts have been made by Mormon scholars to compare the Liahona with ancient methods and mechanisms known in Lehi’s day for ancient arrow divination.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps God modeled the Liahona after such an object or mechanism familiar to travelers in the desert. Or maybe it was a common arrow divination device lost by its earthly maker and found by Lehi as he kicked the sand away that had settled on top of the ball. The loss by that traveler may have been at great cost: he may have been a diviner of great reputation in the desert who shook the ball he had fashioned with his own wind-burned hands to read a client’s future or help him chart his own path. Perhaps that loss put an end to a fraudulent divination career. The same means used by a charlatan to earn his keep may have been used by God to guide a people to a promised land.

And why did the Liahona later stop working? Most readers assume it was because there was no longer a need for it in the New World. An alternative view is that the later Nephites lacked the imagination and faith to use it or had too much imagination and had built up elaborate legends surrounding its history.

In any event, the Book of Mormon account seems to indicate the utter surprise and curiosity of the Lehite group upon finding the Liahona, as well as the awe and reverence held by later Nephites as they kept the Liahona with other relics among their national treasures. Some Mormons today continue to find great comfort in the Liahona as a symbol. For these Mormons, the Liahona represents curious Mormons who are driven to ask questions and are satisfied with ambiguities. I find that like these possible views about the Liahona, many ideas can be entertained by us simultaneously even though they are opposite views that exclude one another. The ability to view two different possibilities at the same time while post-

poning judgment on either possibility has been described by Henri Frankfort as a "multiplicity of approaches."<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, one approach may best reflect reality, but until that approach is known, I will enjoy the possibilities of different approaches.

Whether the Liahona was made by God or his angel wistfully in a heavenly workshop or left by the wayside by an inspired but forgetful desert diviner, the effect on the Lehite band was the same: guidance from God.

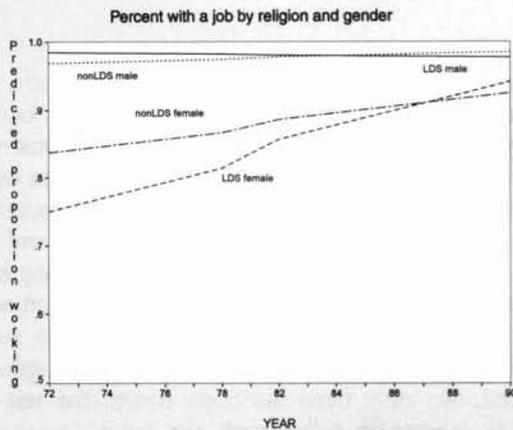
—EDGAR C. SNOW JR.

#### NOTES

1. "The Testimony of Eight Witnesses," introduction to the Book of Mormon.
2. See Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Deseret Book, 1967), 283–96.
3. Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

## PECULIAR PEOPLE

### TREND IN LDS LABOR FORCE ATTACHMENT



THIS GRAPH EXAMINES THE TREND IN LABOR force attachment over a twenty-year period. Labor force attachment is measured by the proportion of people who report having occupations. This is higher than the proportion who are currently working because some people who report having an occupation are unemployed or have stopped working for various reasons. A vast majority of adult men report having an occupation, and the percent has remained relatively stable. In contrast, the percentage of women who report having an occupation has increased steadily. The increase is especially steep for LDS women. By the 1990s, LDS women surpassed women nationally.

Data are taken from the General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. In most years since 1972, approximately 1500 randomly selected adults are interviewed. Caution must be used in interpreting the data on Mormons, because sample sizes are small (224 LDS females and 171 LDS males). To eliminate year-to-year fluctuation created by small samples, a regression line has been fit to show the linear trend over the twenty year period.

## THE LARGER CIRCLE

AS I PERFORM MY ONE-WOMAN PLAY, *MOTHER Wove the Morning*, I find myself having unusual responses to various sections. Most recently I have experienced a strong emotional connection with the gnostic woman who speaks of what Christ did for women and, according to their tradition, for the concept of God as Mother as well as Father. Sometimes my eyes fill with tears as I say: "And what shall I write my dear Tertullian?" (The cousin who has written her that her priestly activities and her prayers that include the Mother are a great shame.) "What would Jesus say to me? Ah, yes. To take the little circle my orthodox cousin has drawn that has no place for me, and to draw around it a larger circle, that I may have a place for him. Love one another, little flock, as I have loved you."

Recently I performed in San Jose at the Sisterspirit Bookstore and Coffeehouse. I studied the audience and noticed that most of the women there were lesbian. They were highly appreciative throughout the play. As I became the gnostic woman, they were very much with me. "And what shall I write my dear Tertullian," I asked. From the front row came a voice that most of the 150 women there could hear, "Up yours, Tertullian!" A laugh rippled through the audience. I stepped closer to the woman who had spoken. "Wait," I said, "What would Jesus say to me? Yes, to take the little circle my orthodox cousin has drawn. . . ."

I heard hushed vocalizations from the audience, little sounds of surprise and insight and agreement. Most of those women had been the victims of the small circle, placed outside its circumference by their orthodox cousins and sisters and brothers and friends and institutions. What a thought, to draw the circle large enough to include those who have excluded us!

I try to draw the larger circle offstage, though not always successfully. Last Sunday I succeeded. The first person I saw as I stepped into the foyer I saw was the Rush Limbaugh of my ward. His highly patriarchal circle has no room for my feminism and he has long looked at me suspiciously, though I confuse him a lot by being warm and friendly and publicly acknowledging his good heart, and telling him an occasional joke (to which he has lately responded by telling me insulting Bill and Hillary Clinton jokes).

I put my hand to him last Sunday and said (he would *never* read SUNSTONE, but let us just call him "Rush"), "Good morning, Rush! How are you doing?"

"Oh, not too good," he said. "My goal today was to shoot five politicians and I'm way behind." And then, of course, I got a really dumb Clinton joke that didn't even have a good punch line. I looked at him and shook my head.

And what would Jesus say to me?

"Well, Rush," I said, "My goal today was to hug five people who are so very strange I can hardly believe it. And you are the first." So I hugged him right there in the foyer, then turned and went on into the chapel.

—CAROL LYNN PEARSON