

# **“Through a Glass, Darkly?” Biblical Studies, Mormon Studies, Parallels, and Problems**

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Like a tarnished mirror, the tensions between Biblical Studies and Mormon Studies sometimes obscure the unique brilliance of Mormon scripture and thought, causing scholars to see “through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term “Mormon Studies” to refer to the study of Mormon sacred texts that are situated in the ancient world. When one acknowledges both the promises of *and* problems with using biblical scholarship for the purposes of Mormon Studies (and vice versa), one is then able to see clearly the potentialities of Mormon Studies.

## **1. What can Biblical Studies do for Mormon Studies?**

Mormons scholars have often been painted as apologetic, and for good reason. Given the extra-ordinary and un-usual nature of Mormon scripture, Mormon Studies scholars have sought to demonstrate the *ordinary* and *usual* nature of those texts using the methodologies and findings of biblical scholars. Most often, these individuals focus their efforts on finding parallels between texts that Joseph Smith brought forth and a number of ancient texts, including the Bible. A belief in the historicity of such Mormon scripture naturally leads scholars to try to situate these texts within the ancient world, including its cultures, languages, and religions. Perceived parallels between (generally accepted) historical documents and (skeptically received) Mormon scripture serve to either validate or invalidate the belief of Latter-day Saints and scholars alike in the historicity of their sacred writings.

Thus, for some, Biblical Studies are only valuable inasmuch as they provide parallels to contemporary understanding of Mormon scripture. However, biblical scholarship can do much

more. In recovering the milieu in which ancient texts were written, biblical scholars have illuminated the worldview of certain cultures associated with the Bible. In many instances, these worldviews are at odds with our contemporary worldview, requiring religious adherents to re-examine their understanding of the *meaning* of particular scriptures.

This contribution of Biblical Studies can add a range of possibilities to the present understanding, interpretation, and application of Mormon Studies scholars. Brigham Young spoke frequently of the need to accept truth from wherever it may come. He stated:

It is our duty and calling, as ministers of the same salvation and Gospel, to gather every item of truth and reject every error. Whether a truth be found with...the Universalists, or the Church of Rome, or the Methodists, the Church of England, the Presbyterians, the Baptists, the Quakers, the Shakers, or any other of the various and numerous different sects and parties, all of whom have more or less truth, it is the business of the Elders of this Church...to gather up all the truths in the world pertaining to life and salvation, to the Gospel we preach, ... to the sciences, and to philosophy, wherever it may be found in every nation, kindred, tongue, and people and bring it to Zion.<sup>1</sup>

This statement can appropriately be applied to Biblical Studies. Subsequently, Mormon Studies scholars should value the scriptural insights of the scholarly Catholics, Presbyterians, Quakers, and Shakers.

The methodology used by biblical scholars can also serve to illuminate previously unrecognized aspects of Mormon scripture. For instance, scholars have utilized an approach to biblical texts called Narrative Criticism, which focuses on the stories that a narrator or narrators present in a given text. In his recent book *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide*, Grant Hardy applies this approach to the text of the Book of Mormon.<sup>2</sup> In focusing on

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<sup>1</sup> *Journal of Discourses* 7:283.

<sup>2</sup> Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

the role that Book of Mormon narrators play in their presentation of events, Hardy is able to highlight aspects of the text that have previously received little (or no) attention by Mormon Studies scholars. Such an approach opens new interpretive and practical possibilities, and similar studies could easily be done by applying any number of time-tested biblical methodologies to Mormon scripture.

Now, a word of caution about drawing upon biblical scholarship for the purposes of furthering Mormon Studies: while Biblical Studies can be valuable, its assumptions shouldn't limit the scope of Mormon Studies scholarship. Because Mormon Studies scholars often assume that Mormon scriptures belong to the same stream of tradition that produced the biblical texts, there is a temptation to follow the lead of biblical scholars in the way that they approach their own texts.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that Biblical scholarship functions within a certain set of boundaries determined by a Post-Enlightenment worldview. As such, biblical scholars are only allowed to use certain types of empirical evidence in order to make their case. Those very requirements limit the scope and significance of biblical scholarship and, in effect, shape the sort of conclusions that can be reached by biblical scholars. On the other hand, Mormon Studies scholars deal with not only the same empirical evidence as biblical scholars, but also an additional number of "non-empirically" received revelations and sacred texts. Thus, it should *not* be surprising if the results of Mormon Studies scholarship differ from that of mainstream biblical scholarship. But while the existence of these additional resources may seem liberating, the acceptance of these miraculously received resources also shape the sort of conclusions that can be reached by Mormon Studies scholars. Even "divinely revealed" truth has its limitations.

James Surowiecki, a specialist in the dynamics of crowds, wrote: “In a sense, imitation is a kind of rational response to our own cognitive limits.”<sup>3</sup> The approaches of biblical scholars to sacred texts, while valuable, may have a tendency to hinder the Mormon Studies scholar from exploring certain avenues that have been ignored or neglected by biblical scholars. In imitating biblical scholarship, there is a danger of establishing certain “cognitive limits.” Similarly, an academically-explained ancient understanding of certain biblical principles *should not* circumscribe the possible range of meaning that a particular passage may hold. When a scholar declares that a certain passage unequivocally meant this or that in the ancient world, he or she is essentially establishing a sort of scholarly creed, delineating the scope of a text’s meaning.

Mormon Studies scholars should be hesitant about such “scholarly creeds.” Joseph Smith himself had a problem with the concept of “creeds.” He said:

I cannot believe in any of the creeds of the different denominations, because they all have some things in them I cannot subscribe to, though all of them have some truth. I want to come up into the presence of God, and learn all things; but the creeds set up stakes, and say, ‘Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further;’ which I cannot subscribe to.<sup>4</sup>

In acknowledging the belief that “[God] will yet reveal many great and important things,”<sup>5</sup>

Mormon Studies scholars should not assume that anyone in biblical scholarship has the *final* word regarding the meaning of biblical or extra-biblical Mormon scripture.

While Mormon scripture does have many affinities to biblical texts, focusing on the field of biblical scholarship may preclude Mormon Studies scholars from utilizing equally useful scholarship in other fields. Returning to the aforementioned statement of Brigham Young,

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<sup>3</sup> James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> “Discourse to Saints” (October 1843) *Documentary History of the Church* 6:57.

<sup>5</sup> *Documentary History of the Church* 4:541.

Mormons should feel free to accept truth from wherever it may come. Similarly, Mormon Studies scholars need to be aware that there are other possible sources of “truth” (or illumination) *outside* of traditional biblical scholarship. Again, Brigham Young stated, “‘Mormonism,’ so-called, embraces every principle pertaining to life and salvation, for time and eternity. No matter who has it. If the infidel has got truth it belongs to ‘Mormonism.’”<sup>6</sup> So, according to Brigham Young, even the words of an “infidel” may prove useful in understanding Mormon scripture. Therefore, Mormon Studies scholars should be willing to include non-biblical (or even anti-biblical) sources in their academic searches.

Just how far can such searching go? Brigham Young once stated, “Do you think there is any truth in hell? Yes, a great deal, and where truth is[,] there we calculate the Lord has a right to be.”<sup>7</sup> While I am not proposing a research expedition into the bowels of hell, I am suggesting that Mormon Studies scholars could benefit greatly from exploring non-biblical scholarship (especially studies dealing with the sacred texts of other religious traditions).

## **2. What can Mormon Studies do for Biblical studies?**

In 1997, Mormon apostle (and scholar) Neal A. Maxwell gave an address to students at Ricks College entitled “The Refreshing of Mankind.”<sup>8</sup> In that address, he suggested that Mormons, with their distinctive worldview, could provide a sort of “refreshing” for a number of professional and academic institutions. Biblical Studies is one institution in need of such a “refreshing.”

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<sup>6</sup> *Journal of Discourses* 11:375.

<sup>7</sup> *Journal of Discourses* 3:358.

<sup>8</sup> “The Refreshing of Mankind,” Ricks College Devotional, Oct. 21, 1997.

With a few exceptions, Biblical Studies have remained relatively consistent, with many paradigms maintaining their prestige for well over two hundred years. Modern biblical scholarship has its roots in Protestant scholarship, and as such, holds fundamental Protestant assumptions about the nature of both scripture and religious development. The conclusions reached by recent Biblical Studies have been fairly predictable, and given its well-established trajectory, one would be safe in forecasting a similar future. Because of the relatively tight-knit nature of biblical scholars, it is not surprising that this is the case. Returning to Surowiecki's study of group dynamics, he writes:

Sociologists and social-network theorists...describe people as *embedded* in particular social contexts, and see influence as inescapable...The more influence a group's members exert on each other, and the more personal contact they have with each other, the less likely it is that the group's decisions will be wise ones. The more influence we exert on each other, the more likely it is that we will believe the same things and make the same mistakes.<sup>9</sup>

The solution to this problem is the introduction of new paradigms by those who have not been firmly entrenched in the group's system of reasoning. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn argues that: "In learning a paradigm the scientist acquires theory, methods, and standards together, usually in an inextricable mixture. Therefore, where paradigms change, there are usually significant shifts in the criteria in determining the legitimacy both of problems and of proposed solutions."<sup>10</sup> Mormon Studies scholars can be the impetus for such paradigm shifts, raising new problems and providing new solutions for Biblical Studies.

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<sup>9</sup> *The Wisdom of Crowds*, p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed.(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 109.

Because of their academic training, biblical scholars have been sensitized to certain aspects of the texts they study. And, in engaging with a community that has been trained in the same network of academic institutions, these sensitivities have been reinforced and perpetuated to subsequent generations of biblical scholars. Ian Barbour noted that inherited sensitivities “[make] a difference not only in one’s attitudes and behavior[,] but in the way one sees the world. One may notice and value features...which one otherwise might have overlooked.”<sup>11</sup> Because of their unique understanding of scripture and religious development, Mormon Studies scholars are sensitized to different subjects than mainstream Protestant-based biblical scholars are.

For instance, in a recent book John Welch argues for a paradigm that makes sense of the Sermon on the Mount, which some scholars have argued to be an unstructured hodgepodge of aphorisms.<sup>12</sup> This insight initially came from observing the temple setting of a similar text in the Book of Mormon. In re-examining the biblical Sermon on the Mount in light of *temple*-related biblical texts, Welch suggests that the organization of the Sermon reflects a world-view that was structured by worship at the Jerusalem temple and its associated covenants. Thus, a cue from Mormon scripture helped to illuminate a text that traditional biblical scholarship has not been able to make sense of fully. Through these sorts of constructive observations, backed by rigorous research, Mormon Studies scholars can provide the world of biblical scholarship with a much-needed “refreshing” and open new avenues for research and exploration.

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<sup>11</sup> Ian J. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 56.

<sup>12</sup> John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009).

Again, a word of caution: there is a difference between “refreshing” and “imposing.” Perhaps the most recognizable scholar in the world of Mormon scripture was Hugh Nibley. One scholar noted that, “Hugh Nibley's contributions to Latter-day Saint scholarship have been to a large degree the product of his willingness to take a refreshing, imaginative view of things and express it in refreshing, imaginative ways.”<sup>13</sup> While his “refreshing, imaginative” views were revolutionary within Mormon scholarship, these views were not without problems.

One of Nibley’s methodological shortcomings was his collapsing of the ancient world into a more or less homogenous system of religion. Kent Jackson, professor of religion at BYU, noted this problem in the following:

Such phrases as “the ancient world is now all one” (13), “ancient civilization was . . .” (43), and “according to the ancients” (131) presuppose a common worldview for all the disparate cultures of the ancient world. But this idea is as unhelpful as “according to modern man” would be to postulate a common ideology for Ottoman bureaucrats, Bolshevik revolutionaries, Nazi fascists, Afghan peasant women, and Manhattan Yuppies.<sup>14</sup>

While generalizations are necessary to a certain degree when studying any phenomenon, scholars need to remain cognizant of the political, social, and religious contexts of the writings that they are studying. Regarding one Hugh Nibley article, Jackson noted that “By removing their ideas from their own context (thus rendering them invalid) and joining them with ideas from other communities--similarly removed from their own context--Nibley creates an artificial synthesis

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<sup>13</sup> Kent P. Jackson, “The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol. 1, *Old Testament and Related Studies* (Review),” *BYU Studies* 28 (1988), p. 118.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, “The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol. 1, *Old Testament and Related Studies* (Review),” p. 116.

that never in reality existed. The result would be unacceptable and no doubt unrecognizable to any of the original groups.”<sup>15</sup>

Nibley’s point in drawing upon the worldviews of the ancients was to show that certain strains of thought within Mormonism weren’t so strange. To make his point, he felt that a broad survey of ancient beliefs would be most convincing. In the process of such sweeping summarization, some of each culture’s distinctive features were ignored. Now, this is not to say that such searches for parallels between modern and ancient texts are without value. Once one recognizes both the methodological strengths and weaknesses of Nibley’s approach, his work may still be used to significantly contribute to Mormon Studies and Biblical Studies. Nibley’s encyclopedic knowledge can provide many useful “starting points” for Mormon Studies scholars. In examining the points of contact that he suggested between ancient texts and Mormon scripture, Mormon Studies scholars possess a field ripe for exploring both the similarities *and* differences between ancient and modern religious conceptualizations.

For the most part, the recognition of *differences* between the Bible and Mormon scripture has not played a very significant role in Mormon Studies. Mormon Studies scholars have been so focused on finding parallels that legitimize their position that some very interesting differences have been neglected, or at the very least, underappreciated. For instance, the perception of anachronisms in the Book of Mormon need not be an embarrassment. Drawing upon the work of philosopher Walter Benjamin, Adam Miller has suggested in a thought-provoking article that the appearance of anachronisms may actually *strengthen* the claims of

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<sup>15</sup> Jackson, “The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol. 1, *Old Testament and Related Studies* (Review),” p. 116.

Mormon scripture.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the same could hold true for other “problematic” areas of Mormon Studies. Differences *do* deserve serious attention, and could prove fruitful for Mormon Studies scholarship.

Neglecting such differences can create methodological problems. For example, in dealing with ancient civilization and religion, Mormon Studies scholars have sometimes approached ancient texts as being *predictive* of Mormon thought and institutions. These individuals, however, shouldn’t feel the need to see every ancient text as some sort of “proto-Mormon” work. As mentioned earlier, each religious community exists within a unique socio-religious context. Cultures are much like languages; it is difficult to arrive at a precise one-to-one correlation between concepts in two different languages. Even if an ancient culture believed a particular principle that appears in Mormon scripture, there is no guarantee that the *articulation* of that belief would be identical; in fact, it *should* not. Thus, if one assumes that certain beliefs or rituals were possessed by religious communities in all ages, that same principle may translate differently in two different cultures. Mormon Studies scholars should not assume that their own understanding of a doctrine, practice, or ritual should hold true for *all* people throughout the ages, and should therefore avoid accepting only that information that validates this belief.

Along these same lines, Mormon Studies scholars should be careful not to let their predetermined conclusions about the nature of ancient religions dictate the results of their analyses. Working from “the conclusions to the evidence- instead of the other way around”<sup>17</sup> does not contribute to a scholarly dialogue. If Mormon Studies scholars want others to take their

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<sup>16</sup> Adam S. Miller, “Messianic History: Walter Benjamin and the Book of Mormon,” in James M. McLaughlan and Loyd Ericson, eds., *Discourses in Mormon Theology: Philosophical and Theological Possibilities* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 227-246.

<sup>17</sup> Jackson, “The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol. 1, *Old Testament and Related Studies* (Review),” p. 116.

scholarship seriously, then they need to treat biblical evidence with the same objectivity that they expect from others in treating Mormon scripture. Consistency is key.

### **Through a Glass, Darkly?**

To summarize, the tension between the study of Mormon scripture and Biblical Studies is to a certain degree inevitable. Mormon Studies scholars are in a precarious position between conformity to and diversity from Biblical Studies. However, this tension may be alleviated, and a relationship of mutual understanding may be fostered if approached in the right way. The following quote from Hugh Nibley describes this well: “Scholarship is...an age-old, open-ended discussion in which the important thing is not to be right at a given moment[,] but to be able to enter seriously into the discussion.”<sup>18</sup>

Nibley is right in describing scholarship as a “discussion.” Too often scholarship shifts from a “discussion” to a dictatorship, in which one party sets the terms for the other. And, more often than not, it has been biblical scholarship that has dictated the terms with which Mormon scriptures may be studied. Given Mormonism’s Protestant heritage, it is not surprising that many have embraced a biblical scholarship with strong Protestant roots.

However, the issue rests upon the sets of assumptions that one is willing to accept when approaching sacred texts. One can only accept biblical scholarship insofar as one also accepts the assumptions that these scholars hold. If one holds a different set of assumptions (for instance, that some sort of divine intervention can recover ancient scriptures), then one need not

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<sup>18</sup> Hugh Nibley, *Old Testament and Related Studies*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol. 1, edited by John W. Welch, Gary P. Gillum, and Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1986), p. 28.

seek to conform to every demand made by biblical scholars. Mormon apostle Orson F. Whitney made the following statement:

We have no right to take the theories of men, however scholarly, however learned, and set them up as a standard, and try to make the Gospel bow down to them; making of them an iron bedstead upon which God's truth, if not long enough, must be stretched out, or if too long, must be chopped off—anything to make it fit into the system of men's thoughts and theories! On the contrary, we should hold up the Gospel as the standard of truth, and measure thereby the theories and opinions of men.<sup>19</sup>

Whitney was correct in cautioning against biblical scholarship becoming a sort of Procrustean bed for Mormon scholarship. One must be careful that these paradigms do not circumscribe the avenues of inquiry for Mormonism's sacred texts. Joseph Smith's disregard for the religious creeds of his time suggests that the past (and its scholarship) should not hold the present hostage. However, skepticism of biblical scholarship's methodologies *should* be tempered by a recognition of its virtues, and a willingness to utilize those methodologies in Mormon Studies. At the same time, Mormon Studies scholars should feel free to introduce paradigms rooted in Mormon thought into the field of Biblical Studies, using boldness, but not overbearance.

It is equally important to note that some Mormon interpretations and understanding of biblical characters and conditions *is* unique. Mormon scriptures *are* extra-ordinary and un-usual. Those who emphasize parallels between the ancient and modern religious worldviews, while overlooking differences between the various cultures and texts, effectively downplay the distinctive nature of Mormon scripture and thought. Only by exploring both the similarities *and* the differences between ancient and modern scripture (along with their associated scholarship) can scholars move beyond seeing “through a glass, darkly;” only then will they be able to see “face to face” with the potentialities of Mormon Studies.

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<sup>19</sup> Orson F. Whitney, *Conference Report* (April 1915), 100.