

# Joseph Smith as a Creative Interpreter of the Bible

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My involvement in biblical studies has also awakened in me an interest in other holy books. In the 1970s, I had the opportunity to do some work on the Qur'an, a fascinating combination of things familiar and unfamiliar for a biblical scholar. I had a vague hunch that, in a somewhat similar way, the Book of Mormon might make exciting reading, but a contact with that book and its study came about quite accidentally. During a sabbatical in Tübingen, Germany, in the early 1980s, I came across a review of *Reflections on Mormonism: Judeo-Christian Parallels* (1978), edited by Truman G. Madsen.<sup>1</sup> I got hold of the book in the wonderful University of Tübingen library, started reading, and after a while found myself engaged in a modest investigation of my own of Joseph Smith's legacy.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I shall try to explain what it is that fascinates me in this legacy as a biblical scholar and as an outsider both to Mormonism and to the study of Mormonism.

*Reflections on Mormonism* consists of papers given by top theologians of mainstream churches at a conference held at Brigham Young University. From an exegetical point of view, I found most fascinating the contribution of Krister Stendahl, a leading New Testament scholar who passed away in April 2008. In an article that anyone interested in our topic should read, he compares Jesus's Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew with its counterpart in the Book of Mormon.<sup>3</sup> In 3 Nephi the risen Jesus preaches to the Nephites in America a sermon which is largely similar to Matthew 5–7. Stendahl applies to the 3 Nephi sermon the redaction-critical method developed in biblical studies: He compares it with the Sermon on the Mount in the King James Version (KJV)<sup>4</sup>—the translation of the Bible known to Joseph Smith

and his associates—and points out new emphases found in the Book of Mormon account.

### Matthew and 3 Nephi

The Sermon on the Mount opens with a series of “beatitudes”: blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are they that mourn, etc. The 3 Nephi sermon does so, too, but it starts with “extra” beatitudes not found in Matthew. In them, the significance of faith (and baptism) is stressed: “Blessed are ye if ye shall believe in me and be baptized . . . more blessed are they who believe in your words” (3 Ne. 12:1–2). In Matthew’s sermon, Jesus does not urge his listeners to have faith in Him and in His words.

Another characteristic enlargement is the addition to Matthew 5:6 (3 Ne. 12:6). The Gospel of Matthew reads: “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.” 3 Nephi adds: “they shall be filled *with the Holy Ghost*” (emphasis mine).

Stendahl points out that amplifications of this kind are well known from the early history of the Bible. They are similar in form to changes made to the biblical texts in the Targums, the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible. They are also comparable to the recasting of biblical material in what is called pseudepigraphic literature—works later written in the name of biblical characters but which did not become part of the Bible itself. An example is the books of Enoch. Stendahl writes: “The targumic tendencies are those of clarifying and actualizing translations, usually by expansion and more specific application to the need and situation of the community. The pseudepigraphic . . . tend to fill out the gaps in our knowledge. . . . [T]he Book of Mormon stands within both of these traditions if considered as a phenomenon of religious texts.”<sup>5</sup>

In terms of content, the additions to the Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi could be labelled Christianising or spiritualising. To be more precise, the 3 Nephi sermon with its tendency to centre upon faith in Jesus gives Matthew’s sermon a Johannine stamp. On the whole, in Matthew Jesus presents a religio-ethical message about the kingdom of heaven which includes a reinterpretation of the Jewish Torah, whereas in the Gospel of John He Himself stands at the centre of his own message. Elsewhere in 3 Nephi, too, the im-

age of Jesus “is that of a Revealer, stressing faith ‘in me’ rather than what is right according to God’s will,” Stendahl notes.<sup>6</sup> Indeed the sermon in question is followed in 3 Nephi by speeches which take up themes known from the Gospel of John (3 Ne. 15–16).<sup>7</sup>

A redaction-critical analysis of the Book of Mormon thus produces a major surprise to a conventional mainstream-Christian mind: It reveals that 3 Nephi is at central points “more Christian” than the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew—more Christian, that is, if the conventional doctrinal theology of the mainstream churches is taken as a criterion of what is “Christian.” Both in standard Christian proclamation and in the 3 Nephi sermon, the *person* of Jesus acquires a salvific significance that it lacks in Matthew’s sermon—and largely in the Gospel of Matthew as a whole, where the main function of Jesus seems to be “to make possible a life in obedience to God.”<sup>8</sup> From a mainstream Christian point of view, there is nothing peculiar in the fact that the Sermon on the Mount is viewed through Johannine spectacles. On the contrary, the Book of Mormon is quite conventional at this point, for it has been typical of doctrinal Christian thought at large to interpret the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) from a Johannine (or Pauline) point of view. But whereas others have been content to *explain* the Sermon on the Mount from a christological viewpoint extraneous to the sermon itself, the Book of Mormon *includes* the explanations within the sermon.

As already mentioned, precedents for this way of handling biblical texts are found in the Targums and in the Pseudepigrapha—but not only there. We should go further and note that the alteration of earlier texts, often for theological reasons, is a common phenomenon even in the processes which led to the birth of biblical books themselves. Stendahl referred in passing to the retelling of the historical accounts of the books of Samuel and Kings in the books of Chronicles as “a kind of parallel to what is going on in the Book of Mormon.”<sup>9</sup> The stories are retold in what may be called a more pious key. One could also point to the astonishing freedom with which Paul interferes with the wording of his Bible (our “Old Testament”) when he quotes it; in more than half of the cases, he makes changes that make the text better suit his argument.<sup>10</sup>

The spiritualising of Matthew 5:6 in the Book of Mormon ac-

tually continues a development which started within the New Testament itself. For it seems that the Gospel of Luke has preserved an earlier form of the saying, presumably from a lost collection of Jesus's sayings which scholars call the Sayings Source or "Q." Luke writes in his Sermon on the Plain, his counterpart to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled" (Luke 6:21). Luke's version of the saying speaks of actual hunger of the stomach; however, Matthew's version includes a religious-ethical content since he speaks of hungering and thirsting "after righteousness." (In Matthew, "righteousness" refers to humans doing God's will.) The Book of Mormon moves even further in a "spiritual" direction by promising: "ye shall be filled with the Holy Ghost" (3 Ne. 12:6). Stendahl commented that "there is nothing wrong in that; it is our common Christian tradition and experience to widen and deepen the meaning of holy words."<sup>11</sup>

### Joseph's Starting Point

Conventional Christian theology has blamed Joseph Smith for falsifying Jesus's words to fit his own theology. This criticism is patently biased, for biblical writers themselves proceed in just the same way when using each other's works, even in reinterpreting Jesus's words. This process is at work in the synoptic Gospels where, as we saw, Matthew spiritualised a saying found in a different form in Luke; it happens on a much larger scale in the Gospel of John, where Jesus speaks in a manner quite different from His statements in the synoptics (both in terms of form and of content). But the reinterpretation of sacred tradition in new situations by biblical authors took place at a stage when the texts had not yet been canonised. The New Testament authors did not know that they were writing books or letters that would one day be part of a holy scripture comparable to and even superior to their Bible (our "Old Testament") in authority. When the writings of Matthew, Luke, or Paul had reached that status, they could, in principle, no longer be altered. The adjustment to new situations and sensibilities had to take place by way of interpreting the texts, in many cases by twisting their "natural" meaning.

I say "in principle," for before the inventing of the printing press, when the texts were manually copied by scribes, the prac-

tice was different. It often happened that “where the scribe found the sacred text saying something unworthy of deity, he knew it was wrong and proceeded to correct it as well as he could.”<sup>12</sup> A mediating position, as it were, between preserving the text and changing it, is taken by annotated Bibles such as the Geneva Bible<sup>13</sup> from the sixteenth century or the *Scofield Reference Bible*<sup>14</sup> from the early twentieth century; these translations are accompanied by a wealth of marginal notes that guide the reader and easily come to share the authority of the text proper in his or her mind. Joseph Smith stands in this tradition, but he treats the sacred texts in a more radical manner.

In his fascinating book *Mormons and the Bible*, Philip Barlow describes the “Bible-impregnated atmosphere” in which Mormonism was born: “Joseph Smith grew up in a Bible-drenched society, and he showed it. . . . He shared his era’s assumptions about the literality, historicity and inspiration of the Bible.” But “he differed from his evangelical contemporaries in that he found the unaided Bible an inadequate religious compass.” Instead of turning to scholarly or ecclesiastical authority to address this lack, he “produced more scripture—scripture that at once challenged yet reinforced biblical authority, and that echoed biblical themes, interpreted biblical passages, shared biblical content, corrected biblical errors, filled biblical gaps . . .”<sup>15</sup> One may call him a Bible-believer who wanted to improve the Bible.<sup>16</sup>

The Bible had been praised in the Protestant churches as the sole norm for Christian faith and life. In practice, this approach did not work too well. Many a reader could not help noting that the Bible was sometimes self-contradictory and could lend support to mutually exclusive practices and doctrines, and indeed the Protestant decision to give the Bible into the hands of lay readers in their own language soon caused split after split even within Protestantism itself. Moreover, the Bible contained some features that were theologically or ethically problematic. Joseph Smith stood up to defend the biblical message and the biblical God, perhaps against deist critics like Tom Paine, but probably just as much to silence the doubts arising in the minds of devout Bible-readers like himself. In good Protestant fashion, Joseph Smith thought that, in the Bible, God had provided humans with His infallible word. Since, however, there are undoubtedly mistakes and shortcomings

in our Bible, Joseph inferred that at some point the book must have been corrupted in the hands of its transmitters. In its original form, therefore, the Bible must have been blameless.

In a similar way Muslims have claimed that Jews and Christians have corrupted the text of the books which they had received through their prophets and messengers, with the result that the Bible no longer fully conforms to the original message now restored by the Qur'an; some early Christians had blamed Jewish scribes for cutting out prophecies about Jesus from their Bible. Interestingly, a related idea occasionally surfaces even in modern evangelical fundamentalism. When no other way to eliminate a problem seems to exist, it is reluctantly admitted that the extant copies of the Bible do contain an error, but then the original manuscript (which is, of course, no longer available) must have been different.<sup>17</sup>

Some scholars describe discussion of the original "autographs" as commonplace in religious literature in Smith's time.<sup>18</sup> But Joseph Smith made the necessary textual changes openly. What the Bible ought to look like, according to him, is shown by the Book of Mormon, which repeats more or less freely large parts of the Bible, as well as Smith's subsequent "translation" of the Bible, called the "Inspired Version" in the Community of Christ tradition and the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) in the LDS tradition.<sup>19</sup>

### Joseph Smith's "Translation" of the Bible

The relatively little-known JST is a most interesting document from the point of view of a biblical scholar. Smith was probably aware that others were trying to improve the Bible by modernising its language, paraphrasing it, and paying attention to alternative readings in ancient manuscripts.<sup>20</sup> He set out to do the same—but through revelation, or prophetic insight, not by way of meticulous study. In this project, he worked closely with Sidney Rigdon, a former Baptist minister, who was far better versed in the Bible and is assumed to have influenced him a great deal.<sup>21</sup>

Although the JST has not replaced the KJV in the LDS Church, it is lavishly quoted in notes to the canonical text with a substantial appendix, "Excerpts Too Lengthy for Inclusion in Footnotes" (pp. 797–813) in the current (1979) LDS edition. It is certainly an important and interesting source for someone who

wants to get a picture of Joseph Smith as a “biblical critic.” His changes show how much there was in the Bible that caused difficulties for a simple believer. His point of departure is the inerrancy of God’s word: Revelation cannot be contradictory, not even in small details. Thus, when Joseph Smith notes contradictions, he eliminates them. Many of his actual devices are familiar from the arsenal of today’s evangelicalism.<sup>22</sup> The difference is that, where evangelical commentators resort to harmonizing exegesis or other kinds of expository acrobatics, the JST alters the text itself.

I should perhaps mention at this point that my way of speaking of the JST as a work reflecting the thought of Joseph Smith conforms to the language used by Philip Barlow, a Mormon scholar. His approach differs strikingly from that of some earlier studies which try to describe, resorting to rather complicated hermeneutics, the JST as a real translation.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, Barlow interprets the JST in redaction-critical terms as a product of Smith’s creative interpretation, based on his prophetic consciousness. Barlow rightly finds a close analogy to Smith’s “prophetic license” in the work of biblical writers.<sup>24</sup>

### *Examples*

Robert J. Matthews presents a wealth of examples of Joseph Smith’s innovations in his magisterial study of the JST.<sup>25</sup> I repeat some of his observations but discuss them from a somewhat different perspective; I also add examples not adduced by Matthews.

How did Judas Iscariot die? The statement “he hanged himself” (Matt. 27:5) is expanded in the JST (Matt. 27:6): “. . . hanged himself on a tree. And straightway he fell down, and his bowels gushed out, and he died.” Thus the account is brought (more or less) into harmony with Acts 1:18 which says nothing about a suicide through hanging but states that Judas “purchased a field . . . and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out.” The same explanation is found in evangelical commentaries even today, as, for instance: “If he hanged himself from a tree located on a high cliff, above a valley, and if then the rope broke and the traitor fell on rocky ground, the result could very well have been as pictured in the book of Acts.”<sup>26</sup>

The JST assures that the number of angels at Jesus’s tomb is

the same in all Gospels by introducing the second angel (Luke 24:4; John 20:12) into Mark 16:3 and Matthew 28:2.<sup>27</sup> However, Smith has more devices at his disposal than a modern evangelical expositor. The latter must show that no extant version is wrong; when numbers differ, he must choose the highest one. When Matthew 8:28 mentions two healed demoniacs and Mark 5:2 just one, Mark, too, must be thinking of two, though he does not care to mention both.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, the JST simply removes the second demoniac from Matthew 8:29–35; both Matthew and Mark now speak of one healed person. In a similar way, Smith has removed the ass from Matthew 21:2, 7 (Matt. 21:2, 5 JST) so that Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on only one animal, the colt, as in Mark 11:2, 7. This solution resolves the problem in the Greek text of Matthew 21 in which He makes His entry riding both on an ass and on a colt.<sup>29</sup>

The synoptic gospels mention that two thieves were crucified along with Jesus. But while Mark 15:32 and Matthew 27:44 tell us that both joined those who mocked Jesus for not being able to help himself, Luke 23:40–43 gives a different account. One joined the mockers, but the other rebuked him, proclaimed Jesus’s innocence, and asked Jesus to remember him when coming into His kingdom. Joseph Smith introduces the penitent thief from Luke into Matthew’s account (Matt. 27:47–48 JST) and harmonises Mark’s narrative with that of Luke by stating that “*one* of them who was crucified with him, reviled him” (Mark 15:37 JST; emphasis mine). Problems of this sort—and many of the solutions suggested—were well known to the Church fathers of the third and fourth centuries who were bothered by them since they threatened the faith of some. To remove the slightest chance of contradiction, Origen even suggested the possibility that there may have been *four* thieves crucified with Jesus, two mentioned by Matthew and Mark and the other two by Luke.<sup>30</sup>

The statement in Matt. 23:2—“all therefore whatsoever they [the scribes and the Pharisees, v. 1] bid you observe, that observe and do”—seems to contradict a number of other Gospel passages. Why should Jesus’s followers obey the ordinances of the often-chastised Pharisees? Joseph Smith makes an insertion that removes the problem: “all, therefore, whatsoever they bid you observe, *they will make you* observe and do” (emphasis mine).



A more serious and notorious exegetical and theological problem is posed by the different statements on sinning Christians in 1 John. 1 John 2:1 states: “These things I write unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate.” Yet 1 John 3:9 claims that “whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him and he cannot sin.” So can a Christian sin or not? Joseph Smith removes the contradiction. JST 1 John 2:1 reads: “if any man sin *and repent* . . .” And rather than claiming that a Christian cannot sin, JST 1 John 3:9 states that “whosoever is born of God doth not *continue in* sin; for the Spirit of God remaineth in him” (emphasis in both passages mine). The picture is now coherent and conforms to the traditional picture of Christian life.

There is an intriguing difference between the Old Testament and the Gospel of John. John 1:19 claims that “no man hath seen God at any time.” But in the Old Testament, Moses is allowed to see God’s “back parts” (Ex. 33:23), and several other biblical persons reportedly saw God as well.<sup>31</sup> The JST takes the Exodus account seriously and perhaps Joseph’s own vision of God and Jesus<sup>32</sup> and enlarges the sentence in John’s Gospel: “no man hath seen God at any time *except he hath borne record of the Son*” (emphasis mine).<sup>33</sup>

The use of the divine names in the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses) was one of the reasons that once led historical critics to formulate a famous source theory. In the Pentateuch, different narratives, which deal differently with God’s names, are woven together into a single story. As the story stands, the name Yahweh is first revealed in Exodus 6:3: God has appeared to the patriarchs “by the name of God Almighty, but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them.” Nevertheless, the many narratives of Genesis, which precedes Exodus, show humans using JEHOVAH/Yahweh. The JST cleverly solves the problem through a slight change in wording that turns the end of the verse into a rhetorical question: “I am the Lord God Almighty; the Lord JEHOVAH. And *was not* my name known unto them?” (emphasis mine).<sup>34</sup>

The imminent expectation of the end by the early Christians and even by Jesus himself has always been a problem for conservative exegesis. Here, too, Smith presents an interpretation which, in its intentions, agrees with evangelical exegesis. Once again the

difference is that he does not resort to expository acrobatics but simply alters the difficult texts. In JST 1 Thessalonians 4:15, Paul does not claim that “we” are still alive when the Lord comes, but that “they who are alive at the coming of the Lord, shall not prevent [i.e., precede] them who remain unto the coming of the Lord.” KJV 1 Corinthians 7:29 announces that “the time is short,” a chronological difficulty that the JST smooths over with: “the time that remaineth is but short, *that ye shall be sent forth unto the ministry*” (emphasis mine). Hebrews 9:26 does not claim that Jesus had appeared “in the end of the world” (KJV) but “in the meridian of time” (JST). The KJV prophecy that “this generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled” (Matt. 24:34) is expanded as follows: “This generation *in which these things shall be shown forth*, shall not pass away, until all I have told you shall be fulfilled” (Matt. 24:35 JST; emphasis mine). Correspondingly, it is not “ye” (the disciples listening to Jesus, v. 33 KJV) who shall “see all these things,” but “mine elect” (v. 42 JST). This revision thus clarifies that Jesus knew the disciples would no longer be alive when the last things began to happen.<sup>35</sup>

Alterations are also made where the implication about God’s nature seems offensive. As the deists had made clear, God does not repent; if He did, He would hardly be God. But the flood story begins with the announcement: “It repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth” (Gen. 6:6–7 KJV). JST Genesis 8:13, by contrast, has *Noah* repenting that the Lord had created man. The statement “it repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king” (1 Sam. 15:11 KJV) is replaced in the JST with: “I have set up Saul to be a king and *he repenteth not*” (emphasis mine).

Nor does God do bad things. KJV 1 Samuel 16:14 claims that “an evil spirit from the LORD” troubled Saul; in the JST, however, Saul is troubled by “an evil spirit which was *not* of the Lord.” In the JST God never hardens Pharaoh’s heart either; it is always the Pharaoh himself who hardens his own heart (Ex. 10:1, 20, 27). In the KJV it is now God,<sup>36</sup> now the Pharaoh,<sup>37</sup> who is the subject of the hardening. In KJV Acts 13:48 states that, as a result of Paul’s preaching, “as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” The JST changes the order of the verbs (“as many as believed were ordained unto eternal life”), thus sidestepping the embarrassing notion that a human being’s destiny may be foreordained. The pe-

tion in the KJV Lord's Prayer, "lead us not into temptation," is changed to "suffer us not to be led into temptation" (Matt. 6:13 JST). Interestingly, the wording of the prayer here differs from that given in the earlier 3 Nephi, which is the same as the KJV, indicating that an interpretative process had continued in Joseph Smith's mind.<sup>38</sup>

Thus far I have indicated parallels to Joseph Smith's treatment of the Bible in the works of the Church fathers and those of conservative evangelicals of today. But parallels can be found in other camps, too—for instance, in new translations which try to avoid the offence caused by the patriarchal worldview of the Bible. In a recent translation of the New Testament, published by the Oxford University Press, for instance the saying "No one knows the Son except the Father" (Matt. 11:25) is rendered as follows: "No one knows the Child except the Father-Mother."<sup>39</sup> Or take the *Contemporary English Version* of 1995. Its translators wanted to produce a Bible that could not be exploited for anti-Jewish purposes; they therefore decided not to use the word "Jew" at all in the exclusive sense as the enemy of Jesus in the New Testament.<sup>40</sup> In more conventional translations, the Gospel of John speaks of "the Jews" about seventy times in a highly disparaging way and even seems to drive a wedge between Jesus and His disciples on one hand and "the Jews" on the other (see, e.g., John 13:33), as if Jesus and his circle were not Jews at all.<sup>41</sup> As a Bible-believer who improves the Bible, Joseph Smith begins to look rather less idiosyncratic than he may have seemed at first glance.

Yet perhaps the most striking of Joseph Smith's innovations is a feature which is already prominent in his earlier book of Moses. According to him, humans are from the very beginning aware of Messiah Jesus's future mission. Even before his entrance into mortality, they can enjoy the salvation He offers. The JST clearly teaches that "the ancient prophets, from Adam to Abraham . . . taught and practised the gospel; they knew Christ and worshipped the Father in his name."<sup>42</sup> A number of additions and expansions to the KJV in the JST make this knowledge clear.

God instructed Adam's descendants to repent, promising: "And as many as believed in the Son, and repented of their sins, should be saved" (Gen. 5:1–2 JST). So the gospel was preached from the very beginning (Gen. 5:44–45), even before the flood. In

one of the JST's numerous additions to Genesis, Enoch summarizes God's instructions to Adam: "If thou wilt, turn unto me and hearken unto my voice, and believe, and repent of all thy transgressions, and be baptized, even in water, in the name of mine Only Begotten Son, who is full of grace and truth, which is Jesus Christ, the only name which shall be given under heaven, whereby salvation shall come unto the children of men; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Gen. 6:53 JST).

Enoch's long speech is summarized in the following words: "This is the plan of salvation unto all men, through the blood of mine Only Begotten, who shall come in the meridian of time" (JST Gen. 6:65). Furthermore, JST Genesis 6:67 makes it explicit that Adam actually was baptized.

For all of the problems that Joseph Smith's solutions may involve, he certainly has acutely sensed a problem in the Bible, touching a sensitive point in the conceptualization of salvation-history. The New Testament, too, hints at God's eternal plan of salvation. But what is one to think of this plan, if Christ actually opened a new way of salvation which was unknown to the ancients, as many New Testament writings, especially Galatians, seem to suggest? Did God Himself lead the Israelites astray by giving them a law which promised them life (e.g., Lev. 18:5)—but which, in fact, it was unable to provide, according to Paul (e.g., Gal. 3:21)—and which in no way suggested that it was just a provisional arrangement? Or is this interpretation a misapprehension and the way to salvation was indeed open to ancient generations, too, if they repented of their sins and accepted God's law? But in that case, if the people of our Old Testament could achieve salvation, then what was Christ really needed for? Had God's first plan failed, so that He now came up with a better idea? This view would make Christ an emergency measure on God's part.

Either way, we are caught in a dilemma. One has to relativise either the immutability of God's plan (the conviction that God does not change His mind) or the crucial significance of Christ. The problem surfaces in 1 Clement, an early writing which did not quite make it into the final New Testament. Clement of Rome confirms in New Testament terminology that God has from eternity always justified everyone in the same way: through faith (1 Clem. 32:4). God "gave those who wanted to turn to him, from

generation to generation, opportunity for repentance” (1 Clem. 7:5). This doctrine implies that the difference between Christians and the pious men and women of the Old Testament disappears. Clement maintains the immutability of God’s plan; but as a result, the role of Christ becomes vague. In fact, Paul had already faced the same problem (though he seemed unaware of it) when he introduced the figure of Abraham as the first Christian (as it were) in Galatians 3 and Romans 4. If Abraham was justified by faith, and if faith without works is the road to fellowship with God, was a possibility thus open to humankind more than a millennium before Christ? And if so, why then was it necessary for God at all to send Christ?

Like Clement of Rome, Joseph Smith definitely holds, as Robert Hullinger puts it, that “God had always related to man on the basis of his faith, and any other terms would, indeed, make God mutable.”<sup>43</sup> But unlike Clement, Smith does not let Christ’s role become vague; he projects the Christian soteriology in its totality into Paradise. Obviously he has sensed the artificiality of the standard christological reading of the Old Testament as it stands. If the Old Testament really is a testimony to Christ (as Christians of all times have asserted), then should it not actually speak of Jesus in straightforward terms?

Smith does not appreciate the idea of development in the biblical thought-world, which is self-evident in modern historical study; but in purely logical terms, his solution is admirable. Nor is he quite alone in his absolutely christocentric exposition of the primeval stories. A Christian addition (perhaps from the second or third century) to the Jewish pseudepigraphon, the “Testament of Adam,” shows Adam teaching his son, Seth, as follows:<sup>44</sup>

You have heard, my son, that God<sup>45</sup> is going to come into the world after a long time, (he will be) conceived of a virgin . . . he will perform signs and wonders on the earth, will walk on the waves of the sea. He will rebuke the winds and they will be silenced. He will motion to the waves and they will stand still. He will open the eyes of the blind and cleanse the lepers. He will cause the deaf to hear, and the mute to speak. He will straighten the hunchbacked, strengthen the paralyzed, find the lost, drive out evil spirits, and cast out demons. He spoke to me about this in Paradise.<sup>46</sup>

Actually it can happen in the midst of mainstream Christian-

ity today that the biblical text is supplemented in a similar vein. *The Children's Bible* by Anne de Vries provides an example. This Christian bestseller, which was originally published in Dutch, has sold millions of copies. It appends several mentions of Jesus to Old Testament stories when paraphrasing them for children. The story of the Fall ends with the promise that one day a child would be born who would be stronger than Satan. "Who would this child be? The Lord Jesus. When Jesus would come, God would no longer be angry. . . . When they [Adam and Eve] thought of that they became again a bit glad." To Abraham the promise is given: "Your children will live in the land, and later Lord Jesus will be born there." It is also said that Abraham yearned for this remote day.<sup>47</sup>

In the JST, the law does not become a problem in the way it does in standard Christian theology, for Adam had learned soon after being ejected from the Garden of Eden that animal sacrifices are "a similitude of the sacrifice of the only begotten of the Father" (Gen. 4:7 JST). The typological theology of the cultic law presented in the epistle to the Hebrews is projected into the beginnings of salvation history. Christ has brought the law to an end, for it was fulfilled in him (3 Ne. 9:17, 29:4) who, being identical with the God of Israel, was also the giver of the law (3 Ne. 29:5). He actually *is* the law and the light (3 Ne. 29:9). Except for the identification of Father and Son, the Book of Mormon agrees in these statements with classical solutions presented by the early Church fathers.<sup>48</sup>

In presenting the story of Israel basically as a Christian story and the Hebrew Bible as a thoroughly Christian book, Joseph Smith brings to its highest possible expression, a tendency which is present, though somewhat muted, in mainstream versions of Christian doctrine as well. I think it is worth keeping in mind that, throughout Christian history, this Christian reading of the Hebrew Bible has been one of the sources of anti-Jewish sentiments. It is all the more striking that Mormonism has apparently never succumbed to this temptation. It would have been easy to argue as follows: If salvation in Jesus and baptism in his name were the point of biblical religion all the time, then surely the Jews who do not recognise this must be utterly blind or ill-willed? And if all this Christian talk about salvation-history was once part of the Old Testament but later disappeared and had to be restored by the

JST, then the Bible must have been viciously amputated by Jewish scholars. (Who else?)

Early Church fathers made just such inferences from the fact that most Jews did not recognise a christological reading of the Hebrew Bible; how much easier would such an inference have been on the basis of the JST? There Jesus need not be sought between the lines, for His coming glory shines openly on so many pages.<sup>49</sup> But neither Joseph Smith nor his followers, very much to their credit, drew such conclusions. Their strong identification with biblical Israel seems rather to have led to a friendly attitude and to a respectful dialogue with Judaism. No doubt it has been an asset that the actual “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity, which was such a sore problem during the early centuries, was no longer an issue when Mormonism was born.

Back to the New Testament! One further problem connected with the continuity of salvation history in the New Testament is Paul’s talk of the law as the *cause* of sin or of its function of *increasing* sin (Gal. 3:19; Rom. 5:13, 7:5, 7:7–11; 1 Cor. 15:56).<sup>50</sup> Joseph Smith weakens many such statements. But then many Church fathers, in opposing the radicalism of Marcion who rejected the Old Testament altogether, took steps to render the apostle “harmless” on such points.<sup>51</sup> How could God’s law be a burden or even a curse (Gal. 3:10, 13) connected with sin? Surely it would be normal to think that the function of the law is to prevent sin or to fight against it? But Paul goes in unexpected ways and actually parts company with almost all other early Christians on this point.

Thus, Paul speaks in Romans 7:5 of the “motions of sins” in our members “which were by the law” and worked “to bring forth fruit unto death.” The JST, however, lets the apostle speak of the “motions of sins, which were *not* according to the law” (emphasis mine). Later in the same passage, Paul, according to the KJV, describes the fatal role of the law in bringing about death: “I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death” (Rom. 7:9–10). The JST avoids this blackening of the law in the following manner: “For once I was alive without *transgression* of the law, but when the commandment of *Christ* came, sin revived, and I died. And when I *believed not* the commandment of Christ which came, which was ordained to life, I found it *condemned*

me unto death” (emphasis mine). Even the claim of verse 7:11 that sin was able to use the law as its springboard (“sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me”) is toned down in the JST: “For sin, taking occasion, *denied* the commandment and deceived me.”

The close connection which Paul here establishes between law and sin is flatly denied by Joseph Smith. Many modern interpreters will assess this action as a dilution of Paul’s allegedly profoundly dialectical view of the law. Others, including myself, find that Paul’s view is beset with difficulties.<sup>52</sup> Smith exhibits common sense in regarding only the transgression of the divine law as a negative matter, not the law itself. As stated above, most Church fathers were of the same opinion. John Chrysostom observed that, if the effect of the “commandment” of the law is to engender sin, then logically even the precepts given by Christ and the apostles in the New Testament would have had the same effect: “This particular charge could never be directed against the Old Testament law without involving the New Testament also.”<sup>53</sup> Therefore, he inferred that Paul must have meant something else, and indeed Chrysostom watered down Paul’s assertions in Romans 7:8 and 7:11 in his exposition of the verses. Once more Joseph Smith finds himself in good company.

Finally, I wish to call attention to a passage where Joseph Smith’s interpretation proves amazingly modern. In Roman 7:14–25 Paul speaks of the misery of a wretched “I” who is not able to do the good he wishes to do—in fact, no good at all. The passage is often taken as a description of Paul’s (and anyone else’s) Christian life. This reading, however, would contradict Paul’s general picture of life in the Spirit, not least in the chapter that immediately follows (Rom. 8) and the one that immediately precedes it (Rom. 6).<sup>54</sup> This is why a great number of modern biblical critics think that Paul must really mean non-Christian existence “under the law”; the use of the “I”-form is understood as a rhetorical device.<sup>55</sup>

Sensing the problem, the JST anticipates these critics and thoroughly alters the KJV text (while still assuming that the “I” denotes Paul himself): “I am carnal, sold under sin” becomes in the JST: “when I was under the law, I was yet carnal, sold under sin” (Rom 7:14). Then a stark contrast to “I was carnal” is created with



the aid of an insertion: “But now I am spiritual.” The sequel “For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that I do not . . .” (Rom. 7:15 KJV) is replaced with: “for that which I am commanded to do, I do; and that which I am commanded not to allow, I allow not” (JST). A number of other changes in the same vein follow.<sup>56</sup> The JST consistently transforms the apparent tension between flesh and spirit in the speaker’s heart into a contrast between two succeeding stages in his life. The modern alternative—that the “I-form” is rhetorical and that Paul is speaking of the non-Christian under the law—has, understandably, not occurred to Joseph Smith.

The JST even omits the last clause “with the flesh [I serve] the law of sin” (7:25 KJV) which some modern scholars have ascribed to a post-Pauline interpreter.<sup>57</sup> Both these scholars and the JST let Paul close the chapter with the statement: “With the mind I myself serve the law of God” (7:27 JST). If the modern mainstream interpretation is on the right track, then Joseph Smith’s interpretation of the passage seems to be closer to Paul’s intentions than was, for example, the influential interpretation of Martin Luther, who saw Paul as describing Christian life from the point of view of an Augustinian monk conscientiously scrutinising his inmost thoughts and always finding them wanting.<sup>58</sup>

### Conclusion

There is much to be learnt from Joseph Smith’s implicit criticism of the Bible. He belongs to the large number of serious and sincere readers who wrestle with the problems that the Bible poses to them, since it is *not* exactly the kind of book it is mostly postulated to be. The parallels to mainstream conservatism of today are very interesting. Even more intriguing, perhaps, are the parallels to the apologetics of the early Church fathers. And yet it is not just the conservative camp that provides points of comparison. Champions of egalitarianism and tolerance have resorted to far-reaching “improvements” of the biblical language in modern translations that try to avoid patriarchalism and prejudice. In Smith’s work one can, as with a magnifying glass, study the mechanisms operative in much apologetic interpretation of the Bible. Most important of all, his alterations point to real problems. Some are minor, problems only for those who insist on an infalli-

ble Bible. Others, however, are major issues for any interpreter, such as the continuity or discontinuity of the “salvation history.” Joseph Smith asks genuine questions and perceives genuine problems. Even those who do not accept all his answers would profit from taking his questions seriously.

### Notes

1. Truman G. Madsen, ed., *Reflections on Mormonism: Judeo-Christian Parallels* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1978).

2. Heikki Räisänen, “Joseph Smith und die Bibel: Die Leistung des mormonischen Propheten in neuer Beleuchtung,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 109 (1984): 81–92, and Heikki Räisänen, “A Bible-Believer Improves the Bible: Joseph Smith’s Contribution to Exegesis” in my *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma: Exegetical Perspectives on the Encounter of Cultures and Faiths* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 153–69.

3. Krister Stendahl, “The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi,” in Madsen, *Reflections on Mormonism*, 139–54; rpt. in Krister Stendahl, *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 99–113.

4. Biblical passages are quoted from the KJV unless otherwise noted.

5. Stendahl, “The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi,” 152.

6. *Ibid.*, 151.

7. David J. Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 47.

8. Petri Luomanen, *Entering the Kingdom of Heaven: A Study on the Structure of Matthew’s View of Salvation*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, second series, No. 101 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 285.

9. Stendahl, “The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi,” 145.

10. Dietrich-Alex Koch, *Die Schrift als Zeuge des Evangeliums: Untersuchungen zur Verwendung und zum Verständnis der Schrift bei Paulus*, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie, 69 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1986), 186–90.

11. Stendahl, “The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi,” 154.

12. Ernest Cadman Colwell, *The Study of the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 55.

13. See Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 56–63.

14. James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 191.

15. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11–12; see also Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf/Vintage Books, 2007), 84–108.

16. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 191: “Apparently Joseph was not speaking entirely tongue in cheek when he wrote, in response to the question ‘wherein do you differ from other sects?’, that ‘we believe the Bible.’”

17. Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 279–84.

18. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 54 note 29.

19. The work was so named in 1936 by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints who had first published it in 1867. Robert J. Matthews, “A Plainer Translation”: *Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible: A History and a Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), esp. 168–70.

20. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 47.

21. Davies, *Introduction to Mormonism*, 43.

22. I have not investigated the matter but can imagine that many of them may also have been known to and used by American preachers of the early nineteenth century. Had Joseph heard preachers explain away contradictions between the Gospels as he later did in the JST? Did Sidney Rigdon perhaps call his attention to such problems and their current solutions?

23. See especially Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 233–53.

24. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 57–61, esp. 60f. The reader will have noticed that I deal with the Book of Mormon in similar terms. I thereby side with those “particularly liberal Latter Day Saints” referred to by Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism*, 64. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 174–84, is critical of such “innovative attempts.” See also Räsänen, *Marcion, Muhammad, and the Mahatma*, 167–69.

25. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 285–389. An invaluable tool for purposes of comparison is Joseph Smith’s “*New Translation*” of the Bible, with Introduction by F. Henry Edwards (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1970), which offers “a complete parallel column comparison of the Inspired Version of the Holy Scriptures and the King James Authorized Version.”

26. William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 949–50; compare Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 304.

27. See also Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 305–6. By contrast, Jo-

seph Smith does not attempt to resolve the problem of the divergent accounts of the various women at the tomb which caused such perplexity to the Church fathers. Helmut Merkel, *Die Widersprüche zwischen den Evangelien: Ihre polemische und apologetische Behandlung in der Alten Kirche bis zu Augustin* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 13 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1971), 108, 141.

28. *Ibid.*, 102–3; Origen had already proposed this solution.

29. This oddity is obviously a result of Matthew’s misunderstanding of Zechariah 9:9, which he quotes in 21:5 (21:4, JST). Zechariah states that the king of “daughter Sion” will come “sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.” Undoubtedly the original text of Zechariah has only one animal in view; the mention of the “colt,” in addition to the “ass,” is a typical feature of Hebrew poetry (*parallelismus membrorum*). Matthew has taken the “doubling” of the ass literally; to make the fulfillment correspond completely to the prediction, he lets Jesus use both animals—however one may visualise this. It seems that Joseph Smith has understood the nature of the poetic parallelism, for he lets the mention of both animals stand in the quotation (Matt 21:4 JST) while removing the ass from the narrative.

30. Merkel, *Widersprüche*, 107–8.

31. These include patriarchs and the seventy elders of Israel in Moses’s time. For a list, see Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 302.

32. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 52.

33. Joseph Smith is very alert on this issue, for he has made similar corrections to 1 John 4:12 and 1 Timothy 6:15–16 as well. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 302.

34. *Ibid.*, 309–10.

35. *Ibid.*, 347.

36. E.g., in the Exodus passages just mentioned.

37. E.g., Ex. 7:14, 9:34. The discrepancy is often taken as an indication of the use of different sources by the final composer(s) of the Pentateuch.

38. See Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 51.

39. Victor R. Gold, ed., *New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

40. Barclay M. Newman, ed., *Holy Bible: Contemporary English Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1995).

41. This is, in my view, an unfortunate feature of the original and not due to any incompetence of earlier translators. Incidentally, it is a feature that the JST has not changed. For example, John 5:18 reads: “The

Jews sought the more to kill him, because he . . . said . . . that God was his father.”

42. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 328. In the Book of Mormon, too, prophets and preachers repeatedly proclaim the future coming of Jesus Christ and describe it in detail. For some passages, see Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 199.

43. Robert N. Hullinger, *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1980), 122. Ironically, Joseph Smith himself set forth in his later revelations that God actually made progress in his own development. See also *ibid.*, 135 note 4.

44. James H. Charlesworth adduced the passage as a parallel by “Messianism in the Pseudepigrapha and the Book of Mormon,” in Madson, *Reflections on Mormonism*, 120–21.

45. According to another reading: “the Messiah.”

46. S. E. Robinson, trans., “Testament of Adam,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Vol. 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 994.

47. The quotations are my translation into English from a German translation of Anne de Vries, *Die Kinderbibel* (Constance, Germany: Friedrich Bahn Verlag, 1981), 14, 21.

48. On Christ as the giver of the Old Testament law in patristic writings, see Martin Werner, *Die Entstehung des christlichen Dogmas* (Bern, Switzerland: Verlag Paul Haupt, 1941), 209–11. For example, the “mediator” of the law in Galatians 3:19 is identified with the preexistent Christ.

49. Similar questions are, of course, to be addressed relative to de Vries’s *Children’s Bible*.

50. Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 2d ed., *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*, 29 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 140–50.

51. See Maurice F. Wiles, *The Divine Apostle: The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles in the Early Church* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 52; Werner, *Die Entstehung des christlichen Dogmas*, 233. Both are commenting on Origen, who denied that Paul spoke so negatively of the Torah—which would have been to fall into the heresy of Marcion. According to Origen, what he meant was “the law in our members.”

52. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 149–50.

53. John Chrysostom, paraphrased in Wiles, *Divine Apostle*, 57.

54. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 358–59, sharing the view that

Paul is speaking of himself, notes that these are strange statements coming from a man like Paul so many years after he had experienced the cleansing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is even contradictory for Paul to say these things about himself when in many other instances he declared that Christ had made him free, and that through the power of Christ he was able to walk no longer after the flesh but after the spirit. “(This is the substance of what he says in Romans 8, of the King James Version . . .).”

55. See, e.g., John Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, TPI New Testament Commentaries (London: SCM Press, 1989), 189–95.

56. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 359–60 offers a clear comparison by printing the two texts in adjacent columns and typographically indicating the differences.

57. Ziesler, *Romans*, 199.

58. Paul Althaus, *Paulus und Luther über den Menschen: Ein Vergleich*, 4th ed. (Gütersloh, Germany: Chr. Kaiser, 1963).