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Despite the manner in which many researchers have investigated the Bible, “The Secret” falls short as a historical method. Though wishful thinking has crafted an innumerable cloud of arguments, such rhetorical gymnastics fail to shift historical evidence. This paper asserts that we can validate core theological truths without allowing narrow interpretations of scripture and tradition to corral us into monolithic historical conclusions. First, I propose a model of revelation that in my view most fully explains the form of modern scripture—in short, that God conforms the truth he wishes to share to our expectations of how that truth should appear. Second, I suggest that this model opens the way for biblical scholarship that is academically responsible, spiritually sensitive, and at the end of the day, potentially more accurate than any other approach. Finally, I emphasize the point that though the implications of this approach are challenging at first, it fits the ideal of faithful scholarship, strengthening our faith and bringing our historical and philosophical views slightly closer to things “as they really are.”

The uniqueness of the Latter-day Saint canon presents equally specialized challenges for LDS biblical scholarship. Though we do not claim inerrancy for the biblical text, in some ways modern revelation resists reconciliation with the results of scholarship more stubbornly than a belief in the divine origin of every scriptural syllable. It is easy enough to allow for the human element in the Bible and assert that despite that mortal touch, the Bible remains divinely inspired and inspiring. The conservative LDS approach to scripture rests on the fact that from the Book of Mormon through the Doctrine and Covenants on to the words of our living prophets, modern revelation presupposes the literal truth of the biblical narratives. Adam and Eve speak to us, Jared and his people flee from the confounding of languages at Babel, America rises a Promised Land after the flood. Our lineage declared in patriarchal blessings relies on the literal lives and relationships of the ancestors of Israel. With the staggering structure of revealed truth resting upon the bedrock of literal interpretation, how can an LDS scholar stand anywhere BUT in the conservative camp?

The weight of scripture presses LDS scholars to espouse an approach too often taken even in mainstream biblical scholarship, namely to jam the evidence (and lack thereof) into the strict shapes of foregone conclusions. It would be emotionally comforting and academically monumental if we *could* use our additional scripture as historical evidence—that the Book of Mormon proves the apostolic authorship of the gospels, or the historicity of the tower of Babel, or the veracity of the Exodus

account. A close reading of this additional scripture urges caution, however. Before we wield these texts as historical tools, it is critical to discern, insofar as possible, the theological and historical nature of these texts.

The scriptures clearly state that God speaks to us “according to our language, unto our understanding (2 Ne. 31:3). When the Lord explains in D&C 29:33 that he is speaking “naturally that you might understand,” he implies that reality is greater and different than the words he is using. Reflection upon divine priorities and human psychology led me to the central point of my paper—that God shapes and conforms the truth he shares to the language, world views, and expectations of his children. When analyzing the content of any revelation, therefore, we must first take into account the assumptions and expectations of the recipient.

If God revealed scripture in a manner that prioritized historical over spiritual truth, it would cause an unnecessary stumbling block to almost all of its readers. Therefore, God conforms spiritual communication to our expectations. When most readers of the scriptures ask if these writings are “true,” they rarely reflect upon what precisely they are asking, and what exactly God is doing. As the title page of the Book of Mormon states, the purpose of scripture is to bring us closer to God.

Again, I suggest that God conforms revelation to the recipients expectations, world view, and language, and that this model best explains conflicts between scripture and scholarship. This concept may trouble the handful of us conscious of these difficulties, but from a salvation and communication perspective, it is the most efficient way for God to transmit spiritual truth. We as scholars are concerned with accuracy and historicity defined in a narrow sense, but such is not the case with the majority of God's audience. When God grants his child a revelation, he is not going to sideswipe them with unexpected historical niceties.

A vision recounted by Orson Whitney illustrates my point. This mystical experience is spiritually efficient and emotionally powerful, but sets off a few alarms in the corridor of historical criticism.

“Then came a marvelous manifestation, and admonition from a higher source, one impossible to ignore. It was a dream, or a vision in a dream, as I lay upon my bed in the little town of Columbia, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. I seemed to be in the Garden of Gethsemane, a witness of the Savior's agony. I saw Him as plainly as ever I have seen anyone. Standing behind a tree in the foreground, I beheld Jesus, with Peter, James and John, as they came through a little wicket gate at my right. Leaving the three Apostles there, after telling them to kneel and pray, the Son of God passed over to the other side, where He also knelt and prayed. It was the same prayer with which all Bible readers are familiar: 'Oh my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt.'

“As He prayed the tears streamed down His face, which was toward me. I was so moved at the sight that I also wept, out of pure sympathy. My whole heart went out to Him; I loved Him with

all my soul, and longed to be with Him as I longed for nothing else...He offered up the same prayer as before; then went back and again found them sleeping. Again He awoke them, readmonished them, and once more returned and prayed. Three times this occurred, until I was perfectly familiar with His appearance-- face, form and movements. He was of noble stature and majestic mien-- not at all the weak, effeminate being that some painters have portrayed; but the very God that He was and is, as meek and humble as a little child.

“All at once the circumstances seemed to change, the scene remaining just the same. Instead of before, it was after the crucifixion, and the Savior, with the three Apostles, now stood together in a group at my left. They were about to depart and ascend into Heaven. I could endure it no longer. I ran from behind the tree, fell at His feet, clasped Him around the knees, and begged Him to take me with Him.

“I shall never forget the kind and gentle manner in which He stooped, raised me up, and embraced me. It was so vivid, so real. I felt the very warmth of His body, as He held me in His arms and said in the tenderest tones: "No, my son, these have finished their work; they can go with me; but you must stay and finish yours." Still I clung to Him. Gazing up into His face-- for He was taller than I-- I besought Him fervently: "Well, promise me that I may come to you at the last." Smiling sweetly, He said, "That will depend entirely upon yourself." I awoke with a sob in my throat, and it was morning.

“... I saw the moral clearly. I have never thought of being an Apostle, nor of holding any other office in the Church, and it did not occur to me then. Yet I knew that these sleeping Apostles meant me. I was asleep at my post -- as any man is who, having been divinely appointed to do one thing, does another.

“But from that hour, all was changed. I never was the same man again. I continued to write, but not to the neglect of the Lord's work. I held that first and foremost; all else was secondary.”

(Orson F. Whitney, "Through Memories Halls", 1930, p. 82 Quoted in Bryant Hinckley, *The Faith of our Pioneer Fathers*, 211-213).

No one could deny the spiritual and emotional power of this account. It changed Orson's life and touches the reader's emotions. Obviously, this vision fulfilled God's purposes. And as Orson repeatedly emphasizes, this vision was as real to him as any other experience. But to those of us attuned to such things, the anachronisms are striking—Orson sees not the Gethsemane of Jesus' time, but a garden like those with which he would be familiar. Instead of hearing Aramaic interpreted through the gift of tongues, Orson heard not only the exact King James rendering of Jesus' prayer, but specifically the one he knew best—drawn from Matthew 26:39. This sublime experience drives home the point of this paper—God gave Orson exactly the vision that would maximize its spiritual affect; at the same time, the details reflect not historical reality, but *the recipient's expectations*.

This theological understanding liberates LDS scholars from the constraints of foregone conclusions. It allows us to interact fully with all available evidence and mainstream scholarship. Historical scholarship is profoundly limited, but we should not use those limitations as an excuse to cling to a superficial conception of the nature of scripture. Scholarship cannot state with certainty that Daniel never existed, for example, but it can examine how the Daniel stories were composed and

function. In addition, the genre and history of these accounts allows us to make inferences about the figure of Daniel.

The remainder of this paper will apply this understanding of revelation to several examples in the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants. These illustrations represent my best efforts to examine these texts historically while remaining open to spiritual realities. I myself at first resisted the implications of some of my conclusions, but upon further reflection they made greater sense in light of how I believe God to work.

Applying this model to the Book of Mormon, it would make sense that the Golden Plates would be translated and reshaped such that they would have the maximum effect on their audience. In translating terms, this text is target-based (resonating with the readers of the translation), not source-based (accurately reflecting the source text, even when it would seem strange to the new audience). The biblical allusions and even quotations that permeate the Book of Mormon that allow this scripture to speak effectively to its modern audience hint that the Golden Plates differ significantly from the Book of Mormon we have today. The Nephites received the words they needed, and we received the form familiar to us. And again, if God's primary purpose is to transform hearts and save souls, this choice makes perfect sense.

Letting go of the assumption that the Book of Mormon reflects precisely the contents of the Golden Plates, an assumption common but doctrinally unnecessary, frees us to discern the most likely source of the Biblical parallels in the Book of Mormon. Though Mormon may have been inspired to write about the power of love, the wording of Moroni 7:44-47 clearly draws upon Paul's sermon on agape in 1 Cor. 13:4-8; the two texts share about fifty words in the same sequence and differ in only minor ways. This seems to be an instance where the basic idea of love was in the ancient record, but the wording came from the Bible, so familiar to Joseph and his contemporaries. The sermon in 3 Nephi seems to have been similarly affected, making it difficult to determine what Jesus truly taught the Nephites. But again, the most important theological point is that each audience, ancient and modern, receives the words that will be most helpful to them.

The conforming of a few phrases to cherished scriptural passages should not shake any one's view of the Book of Mormon, but applying this view of scripture to other examples presents more of a challenge to the nature of modern scripture as it is commonly conceived.

The Isaiah chapters in the Book of Mormon not only baffle most readers, but also create a quandary for the historian. Ever since the late 1700s the majority of scholars have agreed that our current book of Isaiah was written by multiple authors across several centuries. This is not just a question of whether Isaiah could have mentioned Cyrus hundreds of years before his birth; the

language and style of these sections differs and most significantly, the historical situation presupposed in the different parts of Isaiah shifts dramatically. With a few exceptions, chapters 1-39 deal with Isaiah of Jerusalem, living in the 700s BC and facing the threat of Assyria. Chapters 40-55 describe the situation in the mid 500s BC, presupposing that Jerusalem is destroyed, and encouraging an audience living in Babylon, telling them it is time to go home. Finally, chapters 56-66 are set even later, after the Jews returned to Judea in around 520. This scholarly consensus collides with cursory reading of the Book of Mormon, as it includes chapters from Second Isaiah (1Nephi 20-21≈Isaiah 48-49; 2 Nephi 8≈Isaiah 51;52:1-2; Mosiah 14≈Isaiah 53; 3 Nephi 20:32-45≈Isaiah 52; 3 Nephi 22≈Isaiah 54), written decades after Lehi left Jerusalem. Close reading of the Isaiah chapters resolves this difficulty, however. Comparison of the Book of Mormon chapters with their Isaiahic parallels reveals a degree of verbal agreement inexplicable apart from direct literary dependence. Revealingly, most of the changes take place around words italicized in the King James Version, as they do in Joseph's revision of the Bible. We can therefore conclude that these chapters were likely not in ancient record of Nephi, but represent an addition by Joseph.

Accepting that Joseph was inspired to include a handful of biblical chapters not originally in the Golden Plates should shatter no foundations. We just need to shift our view of scripture slightly. My final examples do challenge the literal interpretation of scripture in core ways, however. What if critical scholarship calls into question not simply chapters and words here and there, but the reality of persons and events? Numerous examples could be addressed, from Noah's ark and the flood, to the identity of giants such as Abraham and Joseph, but I will focus on the figure of John in the standard works, as well as closing with a text that asks how far this approach can be taken.

Tradition going back to the second century states that Jesus' disciple John, one of the sons of Zebedee, authored five books in our New Testament: the gospel and epistles of John and Revelation. Two texts in particular invest Latter-day Saints to this tradition. 1 Nephi 14:20-27 clearly states that John, one of the apostles of the Lamb, will write a book that sounds like our book of Revelation. And D&C 7 presents a short but fascinating transcription by revelation of a "record made on parchment by John and hidden up by himself." This section gives a first person, expanded account that parallels John 21:21-23.

The internal evidence regarding the authorship of John is complex. The gospel itself is anonymous, and one would never get the idea that someone named "John" wrote it from reading the gospel itself (though the author is familiar with Palestine and Jewish customs). Several passages do draw upon the witness of a "Beloved Disciple" (e.g John 19:35, 21:24), but the narrator of those passages is clearly a different individual than that eye witness. The only way you get the conflation of

“John, the Beloved Disciple” is to read all of the gospels together. Here is how it works: In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Peter, James and John make up an inner circle of three disciples. In Acts, Peter is most often with John (3:1-11; 4:1-22; 8:14-25). In the gospel of John, this “disciple whom Jesus loves” shows up in chapter 13, and he is often set against Peter. The most reasonable reconstruction therefore is that though John's community knew the identity of the author, later Christians did not. They scoured the New Testament for hints as to who the author could be and concluded that the author of the Fourth Gospel was John. Internal evidence suggests that the Gospel of John has a complex compositional history, and it is certain that John 21 was tacked on by someone other than the author of chapters 1-20! Regarding the other Johannine literature, the style of these works demonstrates that whoever wrote the gospel did not write Revelation, and yet another person wrote the epistles.

Revelation was indeed written by a prophet named John, but likely not our John, as he describes the twelve apostles as if they are separate from him (Revelation 21:14: “And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb”). Now, the point is not that we could not conclude that John the apostle wrote any or all of these works; many scholars have. But we must admit *why* we are fighting the clearest solutions in defense of traditional authorship. Again, the only way to practice responsible scholarship is to let the evidence lead us to the most probable conclusions.

So where does this leave us with 1 Nephi 14 and especially D&C 7? It is significant that D&C came as an answer to a specific question: “Whether John, the beloved disciple, tarried in the flesh or had died.” I believe that D&C 7 represents God's response to Joseph "in his language" which also includes his world view and mythic structure. God answered Joseph in a way that would satisfy his question most efficiently, within the framework of his presuppositions.

I am open to John still being alive, but a circle of problems weaves throughout this issue: John 21 is what caused Joseph to ask whether "John the Beloved Disciple" was still alive. This chapter is far removed from John--John almost certainly did not write John, and then John 21 was written by someone else, even later! Now, the author of John 21 could theoretically have used a source written by the "Beloved Disciple" then God and Joseph could have called him "John" for convenience. The problem is that the text quoted from in D&C 7 refers to the evidence that the Beloved Disciple actually died!! D&C 7 has VERY close parallels to 3 Nephi 28. Therefore, I believe that this is an instance of God giving to Joseph the answer he expects, even if it is inaccurate. Thus this is another example of a pseudepigraphic expansion of an existing biblical tradition. What else could God have done? "In answer to your question Joseph, we actually need to lay down a little biblical scholarship here. You see, first, John did not write the gospel, so "John the Beloved Disciple" does not work. Second, John 21 was

written by someone else, and if you read closely, you can see that the question of the Beloved Disciple living was answered in the very verses about which you are asking. Does that answer your question?"

My conclusion also begs the question: Why did God answer in the affirmative? He could have informed Joseph that John the Beloved is in fact not alive, which would both respect Joseph's expectations and the truth. Given the textual and temporal proximity of 3 Nephi 28 and D&C 7, my working theory is that the answer to Joseph's question was harmonized to the account of "the three Nephites". The verbal parallels are striking; in both texts Jesus tells one group that their desire to come to him quickly is good, but that the zeal to be an eternal missionary presents a better path. I have no persuasive reason to disbelieve the 3 Nephi account, and apart from historicity, these passages present a powerful missionary message—if John and the three Nephites are hanging out preaching the gospel for two thousand years; certainly missionaries can do it for two.

Unfortunately, this analysis pulls the support out from under a popular LDS belief drawn from this explicit section—that John the Beloved is an immortal missionary preaching the gospel until Jesus returns. I still have not digested the fact that he is merely the ghost of mistaken biblical interpretation. Given the power of this approach to banish scriptural friends to the realm of fiction, it is understandable to ask, where does God draw the line? Does he dress up angels as fictional characters? Is the cosmic drama simply a grand but useful charade?

Joseph F. Smith's beautiful vision of the spirit world recounted in D&C 138 lays bare the implications of bold application of biblical scholarship to revealed scripture. Smith sees multiple biblical figures—Adam and Eve, Abel, Seth, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, "Elias" (that is a topic for another time, as he seems to be distinguished from "Elijah" though Elias is simply the Greek form of the name), and Malachi. I do not have the time to go into my reasons, but many of these figures I believe to have existed, while others I do not. What do I make of this? Did Joseph really see some of these beings, and God filled in the others according to what he expected to see? At this point, I cannot say. But who are we to limit God? Why should he not go to whatever lengths necessary to teach us the truths that will save and transform us? Why should he not speak according to the language and stories which we are used to? These accounts retain power distinct from the details of an irretrievable past.

For example, the genre of Job suggests that Job was never anything more than a literary character. So was God's statement to Joseph that he was "not yet as Job" (D&C 121:10) making light of his situation? Was it the same as God saying to me "Well, Frodo had it hard as well"? I would submit that it is not. Job's faithfulness in suffering may have existed only in spoken word and etched scroll, but Joseph's was real. Therefore this fictional allusion functioned to support Joseph in his very real trials,

providing us with an example of faithfulness both historically accurate and personally inspiring.

That God exists, that he loves and interacts with us, that he has a plan for us. These are core beliefs I hold that no scholarship could ever prompt me to reconsider. In addition, I carefully accept spiritual experiences I have had that influence my beliefs in biblical events. For example, though there is every indication that the Second Coming is nothing more than a few millenia of poor exegesis, I still believe in it. Personal revelation is very much a part of my method, but I believe the greatest potential is realized when we allow the findings of scholarship to open our minds. It would be healthy to rethink our historical interpretations of revelation. It is natural to long for and take comfort in certainty, but there is a “more excellent way”. The academic ideal bears spiritual dividends. We need to start with humble acknowledgment that we do not know everything, and that what we do know could be inaccurate. Then we can thoughtfully and cautiously accept certain theories about the past, always remaining open to new evidence, whether personal or paleographic.

Only an open and humble mind can transcend the circularity of revelation according to our preconceptions. It is only when we are open to our cherished ideas proving false that we can trust evidence, spiritual or intellectual, that demonstrates their truth. Our conclusions that are born from this marriage of reason and revelation will be that much more sound. My hope consists of a community of scholars open both to the spirit of revelation and critical inquiry, who allow personal experience to shape their philosophical conceptions and historical evidence to shape their academic theories. This community could then both interact productively with mainstream biblical scholarship and perhaps even be divinely aided to penetrate the thick fog of history and construct theories closer to “what really happened.”

If we open our minds, we can be given new myths, more perfectly corresponding to Ultimate Reality. If we are humble like children, ever seeking to learn how things are instead of projecting our desires of how we would like them to be, we can grow in light and knowledge and allow God to reveal truth and himself to us as it and he is, instead of constraining him to lovingly and patiently humor our prejudices until we are mature enough to surrender them.

Postscript: The following question occurred to me after presenting this paper: What God is constrained by our own language, knowledge, worldviews etc. when giving revelation? What if all that we know provides the raw materials God can use to reveal truth to us? In this instance, it would be counter to his nature for God to give someone a vision of Jesus speaking in Aramaic, for example, if that person did not know Aramaic. This idea bears a dual payoff—it explains the historical inaccuracies in visions, and also should motivate us to learn all we can, so that God can reveal us more accurate truths.