LETTERS

Makes Me Chuckle

Just thinking about "The Benediction" by Neal C. Chandler (Summer 1985) makes me chuckle. It's must reading for everyone who has sat through a Gospel Doctrine class and wondered at the preposterous analogies offered by teachers and students in support of our religious beliefs.

Sacred things laughed at become sacrilege. Chandler's story recognizes our human condition without depreciating our spiritual values. He helps us laugh at ourselves and our propensity to accept and even to promote the secular as equivalent to the sacred. Through Chandler's humorous lens we see the universal desire to make order out of chaos in the struggle to connect daily life to religious aspiration (in this case, a Sunday School teacher's absurd comparison between a movie hero and the Apostle Peter).

Thanks for publishing "The Benediction" and thanks to author Neal C. Chandler for helping us to see and laugh at our foibles.

Bruce L. Christensen
Washington, D.C.

Poetry Neglected

For shame! You gave prizes to everything but poetry! A quotation from Robert Graves is appropriate:

" 'What is the use or function of poetry nowadays?' is a question not the less poignant for being so defiantly asked by so many stupid people or apologetically answered by so many silly people. The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites. But 'nowadays'? Function and use remain the same; only the application has changed. This was once a warning to man that he must keep in harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born, by obedience to the wishes of the lady of the house; it is now a reminder that he has disregarded the warning, turned the house upside down by capricious experiment in philosophy, science, and industry, and brought ruin on himself and his family. 'Nowadays' is a civilian in which the prime emblems of poetry are dishonored. In which the serpent, lion and eagle belong to the circus-tent; ox, salmon, and boar to the cannery; racehorse and greyhound to the betting rings; and the sacred grove to the sawmill. In which the Moon is despised as a burned-out satellite of the Earth and woman reckoned as 'auxillary State personnel.' In which money will buy almost anything but the truth, and almost anyone but the truth-possessed poet." (*The White Goddess: A Historical Interpretation* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1948], p. 14.)

Beware!

Mary L. Bradford
Arlington, Virginia

Like a Headline

I felt like a headline: "Falling Hero Injures Local Man." The myth-maker in us cannot resist the temptation to exaggerate the attributes of our heroes. Take the Cecil B. DeMille/Arnold Friberg prophet for example. He comes out of the wilderness, looking like the father of both

Paul Newman and Robert Redford. Then, with trumpets blaring, he talks with God, chastizes us for our sins, and exits stage right without messing his hair. Having as their goal to depict a believable spiritual person, directors have wisely chosen not to give their prophets a human side.

Jesus said, "A prophet is not without honor but in his own country" (Mark 6:4). He knew that it takes great personal spirituality to see past the human being we know to the prophetic dimension. Something deeply human in us resists a prophet with a human side.

For over a hundred years we lived comfortably with our prophet Joseph Smith, as perfect in our minds as the Hollywood Moses. When historians, frequently non-LDS, began to print evidence that showed him as more human than we had been taught, we often dismissed their writings as distortions and inaccuracies. When the Church opened its own archives to faithful members who were historians and serious students, we began to see holes developing in Joseph's larger-than-real-life mantle. Those holes seriously hurt my testimony. The experience was one of those bloodless injuries where you never get enough sympathy to equal the pain.

What do we do with that feeling of betrayal? On what can we base a firm testimony?

Something that has helped me is remembering that I survived the "fall" of my parents by maturing and becoming a father myself. I learned that even good parents make mistakes, understanding that my folks with their complexities were more wonderful than my cardboard image of them.

Something else that has helped me has been the development of an analogy between prophets and prospectors. As I see it, they are both visionary people interested in finding something of great value: pure gold in one case and pure truth in the other. They both go through a process of preparation. The one studies the earth and its formations and the other studies established truth and prepares his spirit to discern the subtle difference between truth and nontruth. They then venture into the high-risk, uncharted areas of their specialities, hoping to find "gold."

If we think that the prospector brings pure gold out of the wilderness, we are mistaken. For every ounce of gold, there are pounds, even tons of rock. The gold comes as ore and has to be refined. So when the prospector comes back into camp claiming that he found gold, no one believes that he has found pure gold.

When a prophet comes down from the mountain with his load of "gold ore" we embrace it as though it were pure gold. But, they, being human, pick up rock along with the gold. Prophets have the spirituality to see truth in the rock. As a young man with a protestant understanding of God, the Prophet Joseph mentioned only one heavenly personage in his 1832 version of the First Vision. He described things somewhat differently in the 1838 version. Gospel ore also has to be refined by the spiritual thoughts and discussions of many righteous people over long periods of time.

What has fallen is not the Prophet — a man named Joseph Smith — but our childish view of "Prophet," a plastic mask worn by anyone from Moses to President Kimball. We must push ourselves from spiritual adolescence into maturity by accepting the complex reality of a prophet. Otherwise, we will cease communicating with the Lord by defining his servants out of existence.

Harold W. Wood
Portland, Oregon

Flat Earth

Many members of the Church do not understand a very important doctrine of the Church, viz., the earth is flat. And what is worse, many do not appreciate that without a correct understanding of this eternal principle their immortal soul is at risk.

The Old Testament, the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, the Pearl of Great Price and the Doctrine and Covenants all repeatedly teach this eternal principle. And, we have been assured that the Standard Works "are the standards, the measuring rods, the gages by which all things are judged. Since they are the will, mind, word, and voice of the Lord . . . they are true; consequently, all doctrine, all philosophy, all history, and all matters of whatever nature with which they deal are truly and accurately presented. The truth of all things is measured by the scriptures" (McConkie 1966, 764–65). Clearly then, when the Standard Works teach us that the earth is flat, we can rest easy in the knowledge that this is an eternal truth.

Isaiah tells Israel shall be gathered "from the four corners of the earth" (11:12). John saw "four angels standing on the four corners of the earth" and predicted that Satan would "deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth" (Rev. 7:1, 20:8). The Savior quotes Isaiah on a gathering "from the four quarters of the earth" (3 Ne. 16:5). The Lord tells Enoch that he will gather his "elect from the four quarters of the earth" (Moses 7:62). The Lord also orders "a solemn proclamation" of the gospel "to the four corners of the world" (D&C 124:2–3).

Intellectuals in the Church may listen to the wisdom of the world, but how can we choose to believe such a pernicious idea that the earth is a spheroid when the Lord and his prophets tell us it has corners. Mormon bore testimony that in the last days "the earth shall be rolled together as a scroll" (Morm. 9:2). How could a spheroid be rolled together "as a scroll"?

Even more importantly, if the earth is not flat with corners, then there is no priesthood authority, for the Lord clearly told Joseph Smith that the "Twelve hold the keys to open up the authority of my kingdom upon the four corners of the earth, and *after that* to send my word to every creature" (D&C 124:128; italics added). In other words, the Twelve have authority to teach the gospel to every creature *only after* they open up the authority of his kingdom upon the four corners of the earth.

I hope the point has been made. I am troubled when I hear Saints express their loyalty by saying that if the prophet told them to jump off a cliff, they would. If the prophet told them that the earth is flat, would they accept it as true? If the prophet proposed it as a new Church doctrine in general conference, would there be any dissenting votes? Perhaps there would even be those in the Church who would profess belief in the doctrine to maintain their standing.

The dilemma of an honest person in the Church is that loyalty and obedience to the Church can be placed above personal integrity. If I feel deep in my soul that something the Church is doing or is not doing is morally wrong, I can speak out, but only at the risk of it being thought that I am criticizing the brethren, speaking ill of the Lord's anointed, or steadying the ark, all of them considered steps towards apostacy. If I speak out publicly in a way that embarrasses or threatens the Church, some may feel that I should be excommunicated.

What is the word which most accurately describes a person who, by his or her public actions, leads others to think he or she believes something which in fact he or she does not? In the Church, that word is either "obedient" or "loyal," a painful application of those two beautiful traits. In the name of obedience, we are sometimes asked to remain silent when we disagree with the Church. In the name of loyalty, we are sometimes asked to suppress information which might reflect unfavorably on the Church.

There are many doctrines of the Church which I cannot accept. The reasons urged for their correctness are no more convincing to me than the flat-earth arguments were to you. Some of these I can dismiss as not being part of the gospel. For example, it is taught that Moses did not

die (McConkie 1966, 515; Smith 2:110–111; Dictionary, 1983 LDS edition of the Bible, 735). But Joshua 1:1–2 records his death.

Alma 45:19 states that Moses was "buried by the hand of the Lord." It does not state that Moses was translated. On the contrary, it implies that he was not translated as it also states that "the Lord took Moses unto himself; and we suppose that he has also received Alma in the spirit." That the Lord took Alma "in the spirit" suggests that Alma was dead and, hence that Moses was also dead. The justification for this doctrine is that Joseph Smith (*Teachings*, p. 158) taught that the keys and authority were given to Peter, James, and John during the transfiguration (Matt. 17:1–2). It is argued that this is an earthly ordinance requiring a physical body (Smith 2:110–11) and that, therefore, Moses had to be translated. This of course does not tell us why the Lord told Joshua Moses had died nor why, if it is a mistranslation, the Prophet Joseph Smith did not correct it in his translation (Josh. 1:1–2, JST). Since Adam was baptized and confirmed by the Spirit of God (Moses 6:64–65), a physical body does not seem required to perform these earthly ordinances. Hence, it is not difficult for me to dismiss Moses's non-death as not being part of the gospel or a doctrine of the Church.

However, I have more difficulty when other apparently active and devoted members of the Church seem to dismiss more substantive issues with equal ease. For example, Leonard J. Arrington queries:

> What about the Prophet's stories: the First Vision? the visit of the Angel Moroni to tell him about the golden plates? the return of John the Baptist to confer the Aaronic Priesthood and of Peter, James, and John to confer the Melchizedek? Can one accept all of the miraculous events that surrounded the Restoration of the gospel? . . .
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> Because of my introduction to the concept of symbolism as a means of expressing religious truth, I was never overly concerned with the question of the historicity of the First Vision or of the many reported epiphanies in Mormon, Christian, and Hebrew history. I am prepared to accept them as historical or as metaphorical, as symbolical or as precisely what happened (1985, 37).

Lowell Bennion tells us:

> I've just written a series of essays called 'The Religious Merit of the Book of Mormon.' My thesis is that the Book of Mormon is a religious book. It's not a text in theology or history or geography or anthropology, or archaeology. If there's any value in it, it's in its religious teaching. I've tried to pull out about twenty-eight ideas that I find in the book that are worth listening to, worth understanding and living by. Some are original, and some are stated in original ways, known to us through other sources like the Bible, but appearing to grow out of a natural situation. I like the Book of Mormon. I used to teach it.
>
> I realize there are problems there that I can't resolve. There are aspects of it that I don't understand, don't accept wholeheartedly, but there's a lot of good feeling and good spirit, and some very inspired ideas in that book that I cherish very much, that I'm glad to teach and try to live by. It has some great things in it, really. Simple, but great (1985, 13).

Unless I do not understand these good and respected brothers correctly, they seem to be telling me that they are as unconcerned with whether the First Vision actually happened or the Book of Mormon is a translation of an ancient record as I am with whether Moses died. For me, either the First Vision actually happened and the Book of Mormon is what it purports to be or the Church is no different from any of the other myriads of religions that man has invented in his search for something greater than himself.

Santayana quotes Bacon as saying that "a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion." But Santayana continues: "At the same time, when Bacon penned the sage epigram we have quoted he forgot to add that the God to whom depth in philosophy brings

back men's minds is far from being the same from whom a little philosophy estranges them" (1982, 3–4).

It is that new God that is a stranger to me and I still mourn the passing of the old God of my innocence. I stumble when the Church teaches the old God to me and condemns my lack of faith in accepting teachings that have become as strange to me as the idea that the earth is flat.

That I must find my own way is clear and as it should be. That it is Father whom I seek, and not what men think of him, regardless of their position or standing in the Church, is also clear. But surely there is a cup of cool water and a place to rest from the heat of the day even in the Church.

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Innovation

"We do not need innovation." Linda P. Wilcox's quotation from a member of the First Presidency (Summer 1985) made me curious to learn the meaning of the word. Innovation: (1) the introduction of something new, (2) a new idea, method or device.

I think innovation is long overdue. We could benefit greatly from an equal number of women serving on bishops' courts, as speakers at conferences, in compiling messages for visiting teachers, giving gospel principles and applications from women's point of view, and counseling women in distress. I see no evidence of superior performance in wisdom and judgment from men, simply because of their claim on the priesthood.

Rhoda Thurston
Hyde Park, Utah

HUMOR CONFERENCES

The fifth conference of World Humor and Irony Membership (WHIM) will be held 28 March–1 April 1986 at Arizona State, cosponsored by The Association for the Anthropological Study of Play (TASSP). Its theme is "American Humor." Registration fees, $35, should go to Don Nilsen, English Department, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287. One-page abstracts of paper proposals are due for the 1987 conference on "International Humor" on 1 January 1986 to Nilsen, Maria Allison, Leisure Studies, ASU, Tempe, AZ 85287, or Alleen Pace Nilsen, Graduate College, ASU, Tempe, AZ 85287. Also available for $10 each are WHIMSY proceedings I–III: *The Humor of Language/The Language of Humor, Metaforce Be With You: Humor and Metaphor*, and *Contemporary Humor.* WHIMSY IV, *Humor Across the Disciplines*, will be available 1 April 1986.