

## New Wine and New Bottles: Scriptural Scholarship as Sacrament

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ANTHONY HUTCHINSON'S *A Mormon Midrash?: LDS Creation Narratives Reconsidered* (DIALOGUE, Winter 1988) is a heroic and important article that deserves careful examination. Hutchinson's provocative and illuminating themes range from modern scholarly techniques, through King James italics, Joseph Smith, and the nuances of Joshua Sexias' Hebrew, and on to the Adam-God doctrine. But throughout it all, I missed a sense of Joseph actually transcending his environment. Without that, despite Hutchinson's thoughtful and well-chosen examples of biblical precedent for midrash techniques, the emotive impact of his article is relentless, dark, and unsettling. Since I have been unfazed by my recent studies of Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*, B. H. Robert's *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, and Jerald and Sandra Tanner's *The Changing World of Mormonism*, I can only wonder why Hutchinson's work disturbed me so. I believe it is because while he makes no apology for linking biblical prophets to "an awareness and consciousness not normally experienced" (p. 18), he brushes past several confrontations with the transcendent in Joseph Smith and makes no effort to assess the transcendent in myth generally.

Hutchinson's approach to LDS creation narratives in light of text and known historical context (p. 19) is valid for what it reveals of the mundane. However, the paradigm of Joseph making word-for-word translations from actual ancient texts does not prepare us for the picture that Hutchinson so excruciatingly details. On the other hand, is the paradigm of mundane elaboration on King James Version mis-

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takes sufficient to comprehensively explain, say, the Enoch portion of the Pearl of Great Price? How can we reconcile Noel Reynolds's 1990 article "The Brass Plates Version of Genesis" with Hutchinson's findings? And finally, what about *Before Abraham Was* by Isaac M. Kikawada and Arthur Quinn (1989), which challenges the documentary hypothesis central to Hutchinson's approach and defends the unity of Genesis 1-11 against the context of other Near Eastern texts? These paradigms, methods, and conclusions all conflict.

According to Thomas Kuhn, philosopher of science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, we select one paradigm over another according to accuracy of predictions, coherence and comprehensiveness, fruitfulness (especially the prediction of novel phenomena), future promise, and aesthetics and simplicity (1970, 153-59, 169, 185-86). Since no paradigm solves all the existing problems, it is always necessary to decide which problems most merit solutions and/or further discussion. However, all problems deserve acknowledgement, if not explanation, no matter which set of critical tools illuminates them. The thoughtful scholar, then, should ask which is more important in a work of Joseph Smith—the mundane or the transcendent?

Hutchinson, for example, shortchanges Joseph by asserting that "Enoch seemed rooted in Joseph's concerns of the period" (p. 59), explaining that Moses 6-7 fits into the book of Moses' general pattern of expansion and embellishment. However, he offers only a barely perceptible nod towards complex Enoch parallels such as those Nibley discusses in his *Enoch the Prophet* (1985). Understanding Joseph Smith's limits and methods is important, but for the strictly mundane focus, Hutchinson might as well say of him, "Can anything good come from Nazareth? Is this not the carpenter's son?" Should he gloss over the transcendent simply because such materials put him in the position of having to say, "Some things he may have guessed right, among so many" (Hel. 16:16)?

Hutchinson also errs in dismissing connections between the Book of Abraham and the Book of the Dead (p. 50). Note this statement by Blake Ostler: "Although Joseph Smith has been much berated for associating vignettes of the Book of the Dead with a book claiming to tell of Abraham's experiences, he was actually duplicating an ancient practice which he could not have known from secular sources available in his day" (1981, 16-17).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, how can one assess the comprehensive plausibility of Hutchinson's proposed sources for the Book of

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<sup>1</sup> Around the time the Joseph Smith papyri were buried, Jewish scribes were using materials from the Egyptian Book of the Dead in composing the Testament of Abraham (Ostler 1981; Nibley 1981, 21).

Abraham (p. 50) without recognizing the possibility of transcendence suggested by similarities to works such as Pseudo-Philo, the Genesis Apocryphon, and the Apocalypse of Abraham?<sup>2</sup>

Hutchinson also invites us to regard the creation stories as myth in a nonpejorative sense; but rather than offer tools to tap into the power of myth itself, he merely attempts to cushion our anticipated disappointment—"We must be honest, must try to see the world as it is" (p. 70). And yet, he could have done much more. Joseph Campbell asserts that "myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation" (1972, 3) and suggests four important functions of myth (1988a, 31).

First, "myth opens the world to the dimension of mystery . . . the universe becomes . . . a holy picture" (Campbell 1988a, 31). Of course, the nuances of Hebrew and historical contexts are important for what they literally tell a reader, but why get stuck at that level? In reading myth as poetry, or symbolic stories, a too literal interpretation in a narrow historical context, taken as the sole analytical tool, leads to a spiritual and intellectual dead end. Keith Norman's essay "Adam's Navel" (1988) came closer to the mystery, largely by invoking Mircea Eliade's *Cosmos and History, The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1959). In this light, the endowment itself (lately evidenced in 3 Nephi!—see Welch 1990 and Peterson 1990 2:248–56) provides a fuller picture of Joseph as transcendent mythmaker.

Second, myth performs a cosmological function, "showing you the shape of the universe in such a way that the mystery comes through" (Campbell 1988a, 31). However, Hutchinson dismisses this cosmic mystery as no more than the bastard offspring of a garbled syntax. In a Darwinian age, can he not acknowledge the relevance and beauty of a myth in which gods do not create species on the spot, but initiate potentials and oversee processes over time, and a myth wherein the degree of likeness called for as creatures reproduce after their own kind is specified—"They shall be *very* obedient" (Abr. 4:31)? Does not *very* permit variation in kinds of species over time? Does not variety give beauty? Are not beauty and variety the hallmarks of creation that give joy?

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<sup>2</sup> The Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo-Philo is a pseudopigrapha which includes a story of Abraham's arrested sacrifice very similar to Abraham 1:15–20. The Apocalypse of Abraham is a pseudopigrapha which includes a vision of the pre-existence (Chapter 22) much like Abraham 3:22–28. The Genesis Apocryphon from the Dead Sea Scrolls includes an account of Abraham being warned by God to call Sarah his sister that is quite close to Abraham 2:22–25.

In addition, Hutchinson depicts the Abraham cosmology as simply “a narrative technique for introducing the premortal council of the gods” (p. 51). Joseph’s governing star Kolob provides little mystery when reduced to a mere literary device. However, the study of astronomy should lead us to a consideration of Canopus, a bright star which lies at a right angle to the plane of the ecliptic. Canopus stays fixed in relation to the 25,920-year precession of the equinoxes, the unceasing drift of the sky and constellations. To the ancients, this motion signified the rise and fall of world ages. They could imagine the unmoving Canopus as dominating the whole astronomical spectacle—“The Arabs preserved a name for Canopus . . . *Kalb at-tai-man* (heart of the south)” (de Santillana and von Dechund 1969, 73). Is Kalb equivalent to Kolob? The inscriptions at Dendara in Egypt describe the goddess Hathor as the “heavy weighing Canopus” who “rules . . . the revolution of all celestial bodies” (de Santillana and von Dechund 1969, 73–74). This kind of inquiry has direct links to the Joseph Smith papyrus (see Nibley 1980). Likewise Joseph Campbell investigates the mythically recurrent numbers and measures which are thematically akin to Abraham, clearly related to this precession-based cosmology, and which are “artfully concealed” in Genesis (1988b, 35–39). All of this encourages a more transcendent mythological reading of the Abraham cosmology than Hutchinson’s paradigm allows.

Consider, for example, Hutchinson’s diagram of the Hebrew cosmos (p. 22). Why should an article so intent on exposing the dangers of literalizing myth be so immovably preoccupied with absolute apoetic meanings of the Hebrew when, in fact, it could simultaneously question the effects literalized myth might have had on Genesis in the first place? De Santillana and von Dechund write that myth functioned as the language of ancient astronomy. In this scheme, the term “earth” refers to the band of the zodiac through which the planets move. This cosmic “flat earth” is set off by four essential points, the solstices and equinoxes, mythically described as the four pillars, or corners of the earth. The waters above, the waters below, and the underworld all refer to portions of the sky through which the planets move (1969, 59–64).

Ironically, a too literal reading of myth keeps Hutchinson from making connections between archaic cosmology, the biblical “pillars” and the four Canopic jars in Facsimile 2 which symbolize “the earth in its four quarters” (Abr.: Fac. 2, fig. 6) and also appear in the Apocalypse of Abraham, chapter 18, as “four fiery living beings” (see Nibley 1981, 29). A thoughtful comparison of these texts seems to reveal mythological connections between the “Hebrew Cosmos,” the Joseph Smith Abraham, ancient Abrahamic texts, the Book of the Dead fac-

similes, and an archaic Kolob cosmology that predates Genesis. A truly mythic reading preserves the mystery yet reveals the wonder in Joseph Smith's cosmos.

Campbell's third function for myth is that it supports and sustains the social order (1988a, 31). Hutchinson mentions "Abraham's curious racial ideology" (p. 38). An 1828 debate between Alexander Campbell, a leader in the Disciples of Christ movement, and Robert Owen, an atheistic utopian, helps put this in historical context: "We shall now observe that part [of Noah's prophesy]. . . which relates to the sentence pronounced on Canaan. . . . The whole continent of Africa was peopled principally by the children of Ham. . . . Egypt is often called in scripture the land of Ham. . . . The inhabitants of Africa have been bought and sold as slaves from the earliest periods of history, even to the present time" (in Grunder 1987, item 57). Joseph Smith said something similar: "I referred to the curse of Ham. . . . [Noah] cursed him by the Priesthood . . . and the curse remains upon the posterity of Canaan until the present day" (in Smith 1964, 193-94).

Like Joseph Smith, we are culturally conditioned by our myths to see a certain social order here and to engage a particular, racist reading of Abraham 1:21-27. However, Hugh Nibley makes a powerful argument for another view: "Why was Pharaoh . . . denied the priesthood . . . ? . . . [B]ecause he claimed it through the wrong line, 'that lineage by which he *could* not have the right of Priesthood.' What was wrong with it? Simply this: it was not the patriarchal but the *matriarchal* line he was following" (1981, 133-34). While imitating the order established by the fathers "in the days of the first patriarchal reign" (Abr. 1:26), Pharaoh traced his lineage through Egyptus, a *daughter* of Ham, who settled her sons in the land—"Thus the government of Egypt was carried on under the fiction of being patriarchal while the actual line was matriarchal, the Queen being 'the Wife of the God and bearer of the royal lineage'" (p. 134). The Book of Abraham, then, offers "no exclusive equation between Ham and Pharaoh, or between Ham and the Egyptians, or between the Egyptians and blacks, or between any of the above and any particular curse. What was denied was the recognition of patriarchal right to the priesthood made by claims of matriarchal succession" (pp. 219-20).

All of this illustrates a serious weakness in Hutchinson's methodology. He proposes "to set [these texts] within a context of the historical background of the texts' known origins" (p. 19) and asserts that "any effort to understand their wording and doctrine must deal directly with the specific variants of the texts themselves" (p. 69). And while this technique is essential and valid as far as it goes, it defines its own limitations. The text's "known origins" in the case of Abraham distort

the doctrine—race is never mentioned in the Book of Abraham. Understanding the doctrine correctly requires going beyond the *known* context into the *purported* context. That examination reveals Joseph's limitations and his transcendence, both of which are essential to understand his significance as translator.

Again, in relation to myth "sustaining the social order" and the tension between inspiration, text, scholarship, and cultural conditioning, Jolene Edmunds Rockwood's essay "The Redemption of Eve" (1987) is enlightening. Rockwood's analysis overlaps Hutchinson's discussion, but with greater sensitivity to the overall poetic structure. A key difference occurs in Rockwood's reading when Adam does not name Eve, but recognizes her by bestowing a title "similar to the Near Eastern Formula for titles given to goddesses" (1987, 31). In Hutchinson's reading, "the woman's subordination begins immediately" (p. 29). Both Rockwood and Hutchinson work against the patriarchy; but Rockwood does so by empowering the ancient myths with new possibilities, while Hutchinson weakens their authority.

Fourth, myths teach us how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances (Campbell 1988a, 31). Myths have much to say about the various stages of life—birth, adolescence, marriage, and death. Comparative mythology reveals in every culture these same themes—"creation, death and resurrection, ascension to heaven, virgin births." Joseph Campbell offers the following argument:

In the study of comparative mythology, we compare the images in one system with the images in another, and both become illuminated because one will accent and give clear expression to one aspect of the meaning, and another to another. They clarify one another. . . . There is no danger in interpreting the symbols of a religious system and calling them metaphors instead of facts. What that does is to turn them into messages for your own inward experience and life. The system becomes a personal experience. (1988a, 218–19)

Joseph Smith's writings likewise encourage these kinds of comparisons, actually anticipating and transcending Campbell's conclusions. Consider the following scriptures:

All things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world unto man, are the typifying of [Christ]. (2 Ne. 11:4)

The Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have. (Alma 29:8)

I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning. (1 Ne. 19:23)

Joseph Smith provides keys to understanding how personal experience extends beyond metaphor and symbol to include cosmic participation. But he also includes vivid warnings against authoritarian literalness. Consider the example of the myth of "endless punishment,"



sent to "work upon the hearts of the children of men, altogether for my name's glory" (D&C 19:7); or Isaiah's metaphor of God's word going forth as rain or snow "to accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Isa. 56:55).

I have no problems with Hutchinson's proposal to see LDS creation narratives as mythic. I do, however, have problems with an approach that needlessly robs those myths of their power. Hutchinson doesn't so much mythologize as debunk. In consolation, he encourages us to ponder the "implications" his work raises for Joseph Smith's claims that many of his works have a "divine" as well as "ancient" origin (p. 70). As solace, we are to accept this new view of scripture as a "stopgap medicine," an aid to make some sense, "however fleeting," of our lives.

As a restorative to such bleakness, I would propose contemplating Joseph Campbell's comparison of Genesis with other creation myths (1988a, 32-55). Campbell's criticisms of sections of Genesis as comparatively inferior or inadequate correspond exactly to changes Joseph Smith made (compare, for example, Campbell 1988a, 32 and Moses 7:48). That indicates to me some sort of transcendence, and perhaps a good translation of mythic function on Joseph's part, rather than only a mistranslation of syntax. Again, this is something that Hutchinson's approach completely overlooks.

Hutchinson committed himself to explore the paradigm of midrashic expansion on its own terms, to see just how far it could go towards explaining the various creation narratives. I commend him for his efforts. But is that explanation, or any other, adequate? Does it provide accurate predictions? Is it comprehensive and coherent in regard to other experiences? Does it produce novel phenomena not revealed by competing views? Does it have satisfying aesthetic appeal and simplicity? Does it hold sufficient future promise to merit commitment to it? We must assess each of these criteria as values and then individually decide, based on faith, which explanation we will follow in approaching textual problems. Although the questions Hutchinson raises are significant, so are the ones he brushes aside.

Kuhn's epistemology bears on Hutchinson's assertion that we need to give up certainty (p. 70). I agree that we should sacrifice doctrinal and creedal dogmatism.<sup>3</sup> When I was a little boy, my parents took me to see the dinosaur quarries in eastern Utah. I saw students chipping away rock with dental tools to expose the bones. I saw, and I touched,

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<sup>3</sup> But, as Alma points out, we can orient our faith toward the diverse experience that gives "cause to believe," rather than supposing that we simply and finally "know." Our knowledge may not be perfect, but the cause to believe is real (see Alma 32:18, 34-35). Focus on the wine rather than on the bottle.

and I knew those bones were real. But what did they mean? When I was young, dinosaurs were reptiles—slow, dull-witted beasts. The brontosaurus lived in swamps, used deep water to support its bulk, and ate the soft leaves of swamp plants. I learned these things from scientific authorities. Now, I find that dinosaurs were also birds—swift, lively, intelligent, social creatures that migrated in herds. The brontosaurus became the apatosaur after it was discovered that an over-eager fossil hunter had stuck the wrong head on an incomplete dinosaur skeleton. (You could say the brontosaurus was a midrashic expansion.) The apatosaur could not live in water since the water pressure would keep it from breathing. Instead, it lived in forests and had teeth designed for chewing pine needles, which it obtained at times by standing on its hind legs. It carried its tail erect and nurtured its young. What has changed? Everything. Except that dinosaurs are still as real as they ever were.

As to the question of myth in the pejorative sense, I could mention (along with the myth of unchanging religious knowledge), the myth of scholarly objectivity, and of positivist/empiricist knowledge. In the real world, we are all limited by temporality, selectivity, and subjectivity and hampered by limiting contexts. Alma 32 puts little stock in perfect knowledge in any comprehensive sense, but, as with Kuhn's model, experimentation (with discernible results), mind-expanding enlightenment, fruitfulness, aesthetic joy, and future promise assure us that we are on the right track so long as we continue to honestly question, and to propose thoughtful, albeit necessarily tentative, solutions.

I recognize that Anthony Hutchinson made a forthright effort to place Joseph Smith in the company of the prophets of ancient Israel. The problem is that despite the conciliatory quote concluding his article, they, Israel's prophets, also came across as merely mundane. After several readings and considerable meditation, I realize that I should not have been surprised or disappointed that Hutchinson's article, in spite of its importance and its virtues, failed to adequately convey any sense of Joseph as transcendent mythmaker. How could anyone possibly expect to illuminate the ways in which Joseph may have transcended his historical context when they refuse to direct their critical tools beyond that context?

And so, I am left to wonder whether our gospel scholarship must serve only as a form of spiritual masochism. Is the idea merely to take us on a nickel tour of the abyss of existential nausea so that we can ritually prove our intellectual integrity? If so, then I can see good reason to scrupulously avoid the transcendent. Any suggestion of divine might diminish the terror of the abyss and dull the force of our academic ritual. However, if our goal is to heighten understanding, I see no rea-



son to avoid either the transcendent or the mundane in gospel study. Providing new wine and new bottles carries its own thrill. Even a hint of the divine provides a finer vintage, delicious to the taste, bittersweet at times, but very desirable. That kind of scholarship can be a sacrament.

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