

LETTERS

A Great Teacher and Friend

Bert Wilson's recent article, "The Study of Mormon Folklore: An Uncertain Mirror for Truth" (Winter 1989), was a trip of nostalgia with one of my life's great teachers. I esteem Wilson, my first professor of folklore, just as he values Parley A. Christensen. Though I haven't been a believing Latter-day Saint in well over a decade, when I think of my time "among the Mormons," I think about the decency of people like Bert and the honest, clean, intellectual and material generosity that characterizes them. I sense the rightness of Bert's argument: Mormon folklore, if folklore is the aesthetic fabric that binds people of common values, aspirations, and community, is not Three Nephite stories and pioneer folk medicine. Rather, it is the day-to-day lives, integrated and whole, expressed by a people. I don't know that I ever heard a J. Golden Kimball story told in anything remotely resembling a "natural context" (whatever that is). I do remember parents being gentle with their children, men and women helping each other in kinder ways than I am used to here in Philadelphia and speaking in ways that betrayed strong, centered people. Bert rightly points out that it is ordinary experience that characterizes folklore. One of my later teachers at the University of Pennsylvania, Henry Glassie, puts the goals of folklore scholarship in personal terms.

Human beings are defined neither by conditions nor by moments of escape. Wishing for frightening comparability, I want to see people as they are: free and stuck in the world. My interest is in the constant interplay of will and circumstance, so I care less about the rare celebration than about the daily round, and I care less about form

than about content. I am concerned less with the structure of society than with the quality of social life, less with economic system than with the nature of work, less with genres of literature than meanings in texts. I ask not how people fit into the plots of others but how they form their own lives, not what people do once in a while but what they do all the time. (*Passing the Time in Ballymenone* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982], p. 15)

Bert Wilson helps achieve these goals.

I am shocked by the foolish and condescending remarks I hear academics make about Mormons and Mormonism. Such prejudices would be grounds for dismissal if expressed toward other groups. Getting the story of Mormon life "right" is no small task. Bert Wilson's folklore gives the best clues I know. I am glad he has been my teacher and friend.

David S. Azzolina
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Sandberg's Spiritual Sophistication

Twenty-two years ago I was the *Dialogue* staff member in charge of having the Joseph Smith papyri translated by Egyptologists. Until now, no LDS apologist has come to serious grips with the devastating results. Karl C. Sandberg's lead article in *DIALOGUE* (Winter 1989) is a monument to candor (the papyri doesn't translate into the Book of Abraham), esotericism (his thrice-used word "numinous" doesn't even appear in at least one version of *Webster's Unabridged*), and spiritual sophistication. It is about this last area that I wish to comment.

Unlike his predecessors, who sought to give the real problems the slip by deft or even ridiculous maneuver, Sandberg meets the facts head on. While he left out

Klaus Baer's translation of "The Breathing Permit of Hor," it doesn't much matter, for it's not essential either to his stipulation that the scrolls don't contain the words of the Book of Abraham, or to his argument. The argument is really a novel context that allows him to admit every little treasure of the Mormon-baitor and come away an unscathed believer. It works like this:

The facts simply contribute to the evolution of the Prophet's particular brand of spiritual insight. So if Joseph doesn't really translate words from plates or scrolls accurately, or if he copies parts of the temple ceremony from Masonic ritual, or if he sees one God in the Grove but later two—all this is part of Joseph's development as a prophet. It's as if to say that all these ingredients were *needed*—the praiseworthy as well as the suspect—to achieve the inspired outcome.

In response to a 1964 double Christmas issue on the Bible by *Life Magazine*, a reader noted that the sophisticated material on the life and thought of Christ would give notice to many believers that the Bible "had not been dictated by God to King James, who wrote it down." Similarly the Sandberg piece opens the naive Latter-day Saint's eyes to the fact that Joseph Smith did not translate from "reformed" (or any other kind of) Egyptian.

I agree with Leonard Arrington (see the interview with him in the same issue) that, generally speaking, more good comes from revealing historical truths. For example, Lord Charnwood's biography of Abraham Lincoln, critical of the American president, raised the man who had become an American deity to a figure representing human good whom the whole world came to respect. But not every "Saint" can stand this kind of close historical scrutiny. Neither Joseph Smith nor Thomas Jefferson benefited much from Fawn M. Brodie's biographies of them. Jefferson escaped disparagement because historians still aren't sure that Brodie was correct about his romantic involvement with a slave girl. But despite the famous

rejoinder of Hugh Nibley, Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* remains (after nearly half a century) the acknowledged best biography of the Mormon prophet. And the orthodox Mormon (like me) who reads it is never the same thereafter, even after putting all the facts into Karl Sandberg's new context.

Joseph Jeppson
Woodside, California

Feeding the Sheep

I often feel gratitude and love for all the brothers and sisters who feed me by sharing their thoughts, struggles, insights, and scholarly research in books and articles in *Sunstone* and *Dialogue*. Do they realize how much they are needed? Do they know that their efforts reach not only fellow Mormon scholars but homemakers as well?

I joined the Church in France in my teens. It was a wonderful time of spiritual and intellectual growth. At the age of nineteen, unable to speak any English, I left my country to follow my American husband. One has to be an immigrant to truly comprehend the pain associated with adapting to a new country. My one and only reason for immigrating was my husband. To be with such a bright and decent man, I would have adapted to a new planet had it been necessary. Thirteen years later, though the pain of change has been very real, I haven't changed my mind. For one who had always loved debating and writing, being unable to communicate in English has been most painful of all. I had taught a Sunday School class for young adults in France six months before my baptism. (Because I wasn't able to obtain my parents' consent, I was baptized at eighteen.) I also took a seminary class and taught it at the same time.

I will never forget our poor bishop in Berkeley puzzling over what to do with a ward member who couldn't speak a word of English. After scratching his head, he finally came up with a perfect calling for

me: taking all the little Moonbeams and Sunbeams to the bathroom each Sunday. It took a LOT of faith on my part to get up every Sunday morning and face the little angels. How the boys kicked and screamed every time I dragged them into the *girls'* bathroom and unzipped them!

I worked hard to fit in with my American brothers and sisters. After Richard, my husband, graduated from his post-doctoral program at UC San Francisco, we moved to Montana. My English had greatly improved, but I still didn't seem to be speaking the same language as my sisters in Relief Society. I felt boxed in, trying very hard to conform but suffocating. I wasn't being fed. I blamed myself and tried to understand and study on my own what had become for me an increasingly complex gospel. Meanwhile, members around me seemed to have easy answers for everything. Too often our class discussions seemed to bring God down to our level instead of lifting ourselves up to his. I grew frustrated and discouraged.

Finally, a couple in our ward shared with us some articles from *Sunstone*. Even with dictionary in hand, many articles were hard to read at first. But what I was getting from these articles was worth the effort. I was particularly touched by the words of Eugene England and asked our little LDS bookstore to order everything they could find written by him. From there I discovered other Latter-day Saint scholars, writers, poets, and teachers. Though I don't always agree with everything I read, I rejoice in the knowledge that Latter-day Saints have an outlet to freely express themselves.

Richard and I share intimate, insightful moments together reading and discussing these stimulating articles and books. Chances are, if you wrote it, we've read it or will read it eventually. We've also finally discovered DIALOGUE. How we love this journal! We've ordered all the back issues on sale and are searching for those no longer available. How can I explain the thrill I feel when I look at these issues

lined up on the shelf? I'm like a kid in a candy store. I thank God every day for the privilege of reading such scholarly work. My English is improving all the time, but most of all I am grateful for my spiritual improvement. I no longer feel alienated from my ward, nor from my church. I try very hard to remember that if I hurt someone's feelings by insisting on proving my point, then it's not worth it. I wonder how I would have survived in France without access to all of this. French members too are in need of this dialogue.

As part of our church assignment, some Sundays Richard and I drive as far as 250 miles to attend church in a small, struggling branch and visit inactive members, who live completely isolated in ghost towns. Sometimes driving through the cold and snow in the middle of nowhere (and I do mean *nowhere!*), Richard says, "Please tell me that all of this is for something!" I half kiddingly respond, "We are feeding the sheep, Honey! We are feeding the sheep!"

More seriously, thank you all for feeding me.

Yvonne Williams
Billings, Montana

Drifting to the Left

Readers may remember a group created in 1984 called Progress: Politically Progressive Latter-day Saints. After a few years of visibility, primarily in the Salt Lake City area, the group's newsletter was discontinued and the group quit meeting together because the editor/president disappeared with the mailing list (even the home teaching system could not locate him).

In the meantime, Eugene England published his provocative essay, "Saving the Constitution: Why Some Utah Mormons Should Be Democrats" (*Sunstone*, May 1988). Deciding that Latter-day Saints still need an organization to keep us from drifting to the right of Barry Goldwater, a

group of us decided to come out of the closet. Because most of us were Democrats trying to save the two-party system in the Church, we created a new subtitle: An Association of LDS Democrats. However, many moderate Republicans who want to rub intellectual shoulders with kindred spirits have expressed interest in our group—we may have to change the subtitle again, perhaps to something like LDS Republicans for the Democratic Party!

Anyone interested in being on our mailing list, please send your name and the names of anyone else you think might be interested to:

Scott Smith
2455 Calle Roble
Thousand Oaks, California 91360

The Most Powerful Book

My father, Thomas Stuart Ferguson, devoted much of his life to the study of the Book of Mormon. He gave hundreds of lectures on the book and did much valuable missionary work. *The Messiah in Ancient America* contains much of his history and work regarding the Book of Mormon.

A few years before my father passed away, he, my mother, and I met with a publisher about revising, updating, and publishing *One Fold and One Shepherd*. The year or so before his death, my father cut back on his law practice and began that revision. Shortly after he died, I met with Bruce Warren, professor of archaeology at BYU, who agreed to finish the work. About one-third of *The Messiah in Ancient America* is revised and updated material from *One Fold and One Shepherd*. (See the book's preface.)

Page 283 contains the following testimony, written by my father about a year before his death for the family-to-family Book of Mormon program:

We have studied the Book of Mormon for 50 years. We can tell you that it follows only the New Testament as a written witness to the mission, divinity and resurrec-

tion of Jesus Christ. And it seems to us that there is no message that is needed by man and mankind more than the message of Christ. Millions of people have come to accept Jesus as the Messiah because of reading the Book of Mormon in a quest for truth. The book is the cornerstone of the Mormon Church. The greatest witness to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon is the book itself. But many are the external evidences that support it.

About one month before his death, I was with him at our home in California when, for no apparent reason, he said, "Larry, the Book of Mormon is exactly what Joseph Smith said it was." Then he bore one of the strongest testimonies of the Book of Mormon I have ever heard. It was a statement of fact as the sun shines. A little earlier, he had borne a similar testimony to my mother.

During his lifetime, my father passed out hundreds of Books of Mormon and was responsible for hundreds of people coming into the Church.

As President Benson stated so clearly in his book, *A Witness and a Warning*,

We are not required to prove that the Book of Mormon is true or is an authentic record through external evidences—though there are many. It never has been the case, nor is it so now, that the studies of the learned will prove the Book of Mormon true or false. The origin, preparation, translation, and verification of the truth of the Book of Mormon have all been retained in the hands of the Lord, and the Lord makes no mistakes. . . . God has built in his own proof system of the Book of Mormon as found in Moroni, chapter 10. (Deseret Book, 1988, p. 31)

President Benson has made it very clear that the only way to determine the truth of the Book of Mormon is through the power of the Holy Ghost. He also certifies that there are many external evidences of the Book of Mormon. *The Messiah in Ancient America* contains only a small portion of those evidences. Its purpose was to help people understand the Book of Mormon through the histories, cultures,

and artifacts of Mesoamerica and to encourage the consistent study of the Book of Mormon itself. It is the most important and most powerful book in the world.

Larry S. Ferguson
Provo, Utah

A Historical Witness

Stan Larson's otherwise excellent essay on Thomas Stuart Ferguson (Spring 1990) is marred by one fuzzy distinction: "Perhaps Ferguson's case shows the real danger—and futility—[he writes] in trying to use archaeological evidence to prove theological dogma, since religious faith ought to be based on an inner conviction not on external evidence" (p. 86).

Ferguson did *not* seek to use archaeological evidence to prove theological dogma: he more properly sought to use archaeological evidence to test historical claims, certainly one of the clear functions

of archaeology, as the mountainous literature on biblical archaeology attests.

While Ferguson would not have used archaeology to "prove theological dogma," he fervently saw the unique claim of the Book of Mormon—as did Joseph Smith—as a *historical* "other witness" to the biblical assertions. It was because the Book of Mormon's claims were purportedly historical as well as theological that Latter-day Saints had the urgent obligation to confirm or discard that unique assertion, he felt. Thus, Ferguson would also have rejected Larson's assumption that "religious faith ought to be based on an inner conviction not on external evidence" (p. 86) since he began by holding firmly to Joseph Smith's testimony that the Book of Mormon was a *historical* "second witness" to the *historicity* of Christ's life and mission.

Alfred L. Bush
Princeton, New Jersey