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**Orson Scott Card:**

The Book of Mormon as History and Science Fiction

Reviewed by Eugene England

In the first essay of *A Storyteller in Zion*, Orson Scott Card, probably the most widely-read and influential Mormon writer if you don’t count Joseph Smith, both argues for the historicity of the Book of Mormon and also tells why it makes a good basis for his fiction. He tells us the Book of Mormon is “the most important book in my life” (p. 13); one he has read many times from early youth; and one that influenced his writing style, his initial desire to be an archeologist, and his first efforts to write Mormon drama; and one that led to his writing of animations for Living Scriptures, his commission by the Brethren a few years back to rewrite the Hill Cumorah Pageant, and his current best-selling science fiction series, *Homecoming*.

Card is perfectly clear about the religious purpose of his latest sci-fi project: “These books are really just another dramatization of the Book of Mormon, only transformed into a science fictional
setting, where by fictionalizing it I have the freedom to explore questions of character and society in a way that I couldn’t in a more direct adaptation” (Storyteller, p. 14). I have now read the three published volumes twice and the two unpublished ones once, and my judgment is that Card succeeds very well in his project: the books are good literature and good psychological and social (thus religious) commentary—valuable to general readers and, in my view, even more valuable for Mormon readers. But the project raises an interesting question: If the historical truth of the Book of Mormon is so important (and it clearly is to Card, because that first essay, “The Book of Mormon—Artifact or Artifice?” is an extended argument for historicity based on Card’s expertise as a sci-fi writer), why does he need to “fictionalize” it (rather than merely writing commentary or personal essays) to be “free” to explore the most important moral and religious questions?

Card has an answer in his “Open Letter,” written in quite apparent anger after some of his Mormon readers had written to his publisher and General Authorities, accusing him of “plagiarizing” the Book of Mormon and treating it irreverently. In that letter he wittily explains why “you can’t plagiarize history.” He also plausibly argues that fictionalizing the Book of Mormon still gives “a taste of it” which “has the power to do good in the world,” claiming that skeptical non-Mormons remain “outside” the story of the Book of Mormon itself and thus are immune to the “transformative power” of sacred writing not their own—since they know what it is. In other words, a science fiction version of the Book of Mormon makes it a better missionary tool? No, it makes it a better influence for good on our civilization because readers won’t resist its moral and spiritual power because of religious prejudice.

Card even goes on to argue that he chose the form of Homecoming because “speculative fiction” (sci-fi and fantasy) is “the one literary tradition available today to writers who would like to deal seriously with great moral, religious, and cosmological and eschatological issues without confining themselves to members of a particular religious group” (“Open Letter,” p. 10). Say what? Surely Card knows that our greatest writers, from Shakespeare to Isaac Bashevis Singer and Flannery O’Connor, have dealt with such issues through both realism and fantasy—
sometimes even by describing a “particular religious group” (such as Southern Baptists and Hasidic Jews) but never thereby confining their readership to that group.

Card’s able defense of science fiction as a worthy genre for great subjects and issues goes too far when he claims it is not only as good as but superior to other forms for moral and religious exploration. But what matters is that for him “speculative fiction” apparently is the best form for such exploration—and *Homecoming* (and his Enders and Alvin Maker series) are where he does indeed, in my view, “deal with religious, theological, and moral issues with greater clarity” (p. 11) than in his realistic novels, *Saints* and *Lost Boys*.

Card demonstrates convincingly that his expertise as a sci-fi writer enables him to defend the historicity of the Book of Mormon with unique authority. It takes a good hoaxer to know one, and that’s exactly the full-time business he and his colleagues are engaged in: creating believable but totally fictional cultures—hoaxes. His basic premise is that “every storyteller, no matter how careful he is, will inadvertently confess his own character and the society he lives in,” that no matter how well-educated or clever, “if he tries to write something that is not of his own culture he will give himself away with every unconscious choice he makes. Yet he’ll never know he’s doing it because it won’t occur to him that it could be any other way” (*Storyteller* p. 20). He gives examples of how the best recent sci-fi writers, as well as the fiction writers of the 30s and 40s and TV sitcom writers of the 50s and 60s, constantly gave themselves away—and then gives a series of examples of how Joseph Smith, if faking it, would have given away cultural clues from the 1820s, but didn’t.

Card includes both some things Joseph unexpectedly left out (such as connecting Native Americans to the ten lost tribes, a central speculation of the 1820s) and things he inexplicably included (elected judges but no real democracy like the American one). And he argues that hoaxers can’t resist at least calling attention to their clever creations of cultural strangeness (flaunting “one’s fascinating ideas”), but Joseph never does.

My problem with all this is that if Card is clever enough to see all this cleverness, why isn’t it just possible that Joseph was clever enough to fake it—not only to invent cultural difference but to
disguise the process. Card seems to think Joseph simply could not be as clever as sci-fi writers: "We... have generations of experience to guide us, and we still can't get it right. The author of the Book of Mormon, if it's a hoax, managed to get it right—even in cases where getting it right looks wrong to most people, who haven't thought it through... he did something so sophisticated that even those who do this sort of thing for a living still don't usually get it right" (p. 36). Precisely! But, if so, that makes Joseph a genius, not a translator of an ancient document.

Card is aware of this dilemma, one which all of us who defend the historicity of the Book of Mormon must face: “Now, does this mean that I’ve proved the Book of Mormon true? Obviously not. You can always still suppose that perhaps Joseph Smith or whoever wrote the Book of Mormon was the greatest and luckiest creator of phony documents from made-up alien culture ever in history. The Book of Mormon only matters because it's a life-changing book... the important truth of the Book of Mormon is only understood with the Spirit through faith. If you don’t believe in the book, it’s not going to change your life. And I mean believe in it in a way far different from believing it’s a genuine artifact” (p. 44). This, of course, is what our greatest Book of Mormon scholar, Hugh Nibley, has constantly reaffirmed—that the historicity of the Book of Mormon (which it has been his great life work to substantiate) means very little in comparison to its moral and religious messages (which he has tried constantly to explicate and highlight, with far too little appreciation).

Actually, the case for historicity is perhaps stronger and more important than Card recognizes in his statement above. His most persuasive examples are those where the text is not only “clever” in giving unusual cultural details and then not calling attention to them, but also where it gives unexpected cultural details that have in fact been verified since 1830 by new knowledge concerning Mesoamerica that was unavailable anywhere in Joseph’s time—such as “tribal organizations” that persist over centuries (pp. 30–31), instant creation of cities rather than forts or towns (pp. 33–34), swooning to show great emotion, and kings with sons as subkings (p. 39). And though the religious and moral content of the Book of Mormon is indeed what matters most—is the only part that is “life-changing”—still, I am convinced, through my own
professional expertise as a teacher of both fiction and "true" personal essays, that it matters very much to readers whether they believe that what they are reading is conveying moral and spiritual truth through made-up stories about things that could happen or on the other hand bearing witness fairly accurately of what actually happened to people like themselves.

In other words, for most of us (and this may be a weakness rather than a strength), "actual" truth has greater authority, greater power to impel us to change our lives, than fictive truth.

The moral and spiritual truths of the Book of Mormon seem to have more power for most of us when we believe that they are given divine authority as part of an actual history, written on real records and delivered by a real angel—and especially if we are convinced they were taught by a real Jesus Christ whose divinity and resurrection is dramatically and uniquely verified by his supernatural appearance on this continent after his death in Jerusalem. Again, I'm not sure this is a good thing (it seems we ought to be able to believe moral and spiritual truths for their intrinsic value, proven in our experience and verified by the Holy Ghost, rather than through external authority), but it seems nevertheless a fact—a fact God seems to recognize by giving us some but not conclusive evidence that the Book of Mormon is historical. Perhaps he doesn't give us complete and certain evidence—which surely he could easily do if he wished—because in fact it is better if we can believe through experience and faith rather than authority.

Since I've ventured so far into this matter of the historicity of the Book of Mormon, let me, with the help of Card's writings, unburden my soul. I believe the Book of Mormon is a translation of tangible ancient documents which in turn are an account of real people, that they were delivered to Joseph Smith by an angel, and that he "translated" them to produce a book of particular moral and spiritual value for all of God's children in the last days. I cannot otherwise account for the significant and growing (though certainly not unassailable) evidence of the kind Card uses in his essay—and that Hugh Nibley and John Sorenson and F.A.R.M.S., etc., continue to provide—that Joseph "got it right" about a host of unusual cultural and geographical and language details.
However, I do not believe that either the ancient documents or the translation are literally “true” or “perfect.” The corollary to Card’s point about all hoaxers inevitably revealing their own cultural assumptions in all they write is that, as he recognizes, all historians and translators reveal themselves too, no matter how inspired: “Joseph Smith didn’t write the Book of Mormon, though he did translate it, so that his voice is present when we read it, including the flaws in his language and understanding. Those who wrote the original were also fallible human beings who will reveal their culture and their assumptions” (p. 45). God himself reminds us of this in Doctrine and Covenants 1:24: “These commandments are of me, and were given to my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language” (“language” of course includes their culture and world view). I cannot otherwise account for the evidence, from the error-ridden original manuscript to the apparent racism and sexism and elitism of some Book of Mormon writers to the 1820s word choices, perspectives, and religious anxieties that seem to influence Joseph’s translation.

In other words, it seems to me that neither the position of David Whitmer (that Joseph shouldn’t edit his previous revelations because they were given from God word by word) nor the position of some modern Mormons and non-Mormons (that the Book of Mormon is of immense, even “scriptural,” literary and moral and spiritual worth but is entirely a fiction) accounts for all the evidence—or could be called an “orthodox” Mormon position. But between those two positions there seems to me a great deal of room for exploration and difference of opinion—and for a great variety of orthodoxy, from those who believe that only Joseph Smith’s limitations in punctuation and grammar affected the translation to those who believe a great deal of Joseph’s own genius and preoccupations and world view are there, in part through God’s direction in order to make the Book of Mormon more relevant to a modern audience and its particular religious needs than the literal ancient records were.

Card seems to me quite far to the “left” on this spectrum, though still perfectly orthodox. He recognizes that Joseph, like any translator, influences the text “in matters of word choice, consciously or unconsciously linking Book of Mormon events to experiences that he and his American readers could understand,
choosing the clearest language he had available to him, fitting ideas he found in the book into existing American concepts as best he could” (p. 16). He believes (and shows in a convincing way when he creates “Nafai” as the first record-keeper in *Memory of Earth*) that Nephi’s record was “written in the context of many wars against his brothers’ people, and therefore would include a great deal of justification of his own people’s rightness versus their enemies’ wrongness. It would not be an impartial history by any means, or even an impartial autobiography” (p. 16). Similarly, Mormon, the dominant author, was “a general since his youth, leader of armies, a man of war, and a man of God. We should expect to see reflections of that in the text. He is watching his people collapse and decay, and no doubt wondering about the mechanisms that cause nations to collapse and decay. . . . We’ll find his priorities and interests reflected in his selections of things to include” (p. 17).

Card even speculates (as part of his effort to defend the historicity of the Book of Mormon in the face of the complete lack of historical evidence to support the claim of King Zarahemla that his people, the Mulekites, were descendants of the youngest son of Zedekiah, King of Judah—and some linguistic and other evidence against it) that Zarahemla *made up* this story as part of his effort to establish credentials in his negotiations with Mosiah over who should rule. He points out that such a fiction by Zarahemla “does not imply that the Book of Mormon is somehow false. No one in the Book of Mormon ever claims that the story of Mulek came to anybody by inspiration. . . . That Mormon and other writers believed the story does not prove it true or false; it simply proves that it was part of the Nephite culture” (p. 33). Another part of Nephite culture that Card clearly believes is simply that—cultural, not divine inspiration—is the virtual absence from the record of women, which he again sees as, if anything, *confirming* rather than denying the historicity of the Book of Mormon, which is “quite startling in its omission of women from the events of Nephite history. This is quite foreign to attitudes in Joseph Smith’s culture” (p. 26). Sexism and other forms of discrimination are a central focus of Card’s retelling of the story in *Homecoming*—which becomes one long plea for tolerance of diversity as the central gospel principle, the chief
characteristic of the Christ-like divinity, the Keeper of Earth, who in the last book is anticipated as one who will come in person to the earth when his people succeed in becoming more like him in unconditional love.

Before I turn to the details of that very valuable fictional retelling, let me make one last, connected point about historicity. It seems to me that if, in our concern about the historicity of the Book of Mormon, we lose our tolerance for diversity, become less rather than more Christ-like in our actions, attitudes, and even our scholarly discourse, then something has gone badly wrong. What does it profit to find the Book of Mormon divinely inspired—but not capable of inspiring us to more gentle and loving lives? Let me be blunt: Some recent attempts to defend the historicity of the Book of Mormon have engaged in name-calling, ad hominem attacks, intellectual and religious snobbery (yes, on both sides), and even false stereotyping of all scholars who try to examine the connections of the Book of Mormon to nineteenth-century culture as having exactly the same beliefs and agenda—and worst of all, defaming them all as “apostates” and “enemies of the Church.”

I am not saying that all those who have questioned all or some of the historicity of the Book of Mormon are without their own agendas (even hidden ones) and vices. I am saying that there is room for a wide range of reasonable opinion about the nature of the Book of Mormon (about the relative amounts and importance of its historical and moral and spiritual truths) and about the manner of its translation (which after all took place in a highly unusual way, apparently without Joseph even looking at the plates) and that especially those who believe it has the extra authority of literal historical truth ought to demonstrate that faith by extraordinary allegiance to its teachings about tolerance and generosity. We should deal rigorously (and, yes, sympathetically) with all the arguments and evidence—period. Why “sympathetically”? Because the purpose of all of us ought to be understanding of the Book of Mormon and allegiance to its teachings—not mere proof—and even those who question the literal historicity of the Book of Mormon, but value its moral and religious teachings, can add to our understanding and allegiance.
But back to *Homecoming*, Card’s five-volume sci-fi version of First and Second Nephi and Mosiah. Earth’s advanced civilization has been destroyed by nuclear war, and its survivors leave to colonize other planets. Those who go to “Harmony,” a hundred light years away, establish a sophisticated computer at their landing site to protect their starships until some future need and, with a satellite network, to oversee the planet—especially controlling the human descendants, who have been genetically altered to be receptive to its influences, so they do not again develop weapons of mass destruction. Now, forty million years later, much longer than the original settlers thought it would take to produce naturally peaceful people, the computer, the “Oversoul,” is breaking down and losing control. Some strong-minded humans are resisting its influence and developing new weapons and starting wars, so the Oversoul calls other strong-minded but also responsive humans to take it back to Earth, where it can be repaired and return able to prevent another nuclear holocaust.

The first person who is called is, of course, Lehi (Wetchik), a desert-traveling merchant (much influence from Nibley here) who lives near Jerusalem (Basilica) with his sons, Laman (Elemak), Lemuel (Mebbekew), Nephi (Nafai), and Sam (Issib). He receives, from the Oversoul, a vision of the destruction of Jerusalem as a result of getting involved in the conflict between Babylon and Egypt (Goraynivat and Potokgavan) and a call to warn the city—which he does, with the natural result that he must flee for his life into the desert. Volume 1, *The Memory of Earth*, takes this story through 1 Nephi 6, with the killing of Laban (Gaballufix) and the obtaining of the brass plates (the Index, a computerized ball shaped like the Liahona which gives direct access to the Oversoul, including its knowledge of the history and genealogy of Harmony, and gives directions to Wetchik for their journey through the desert).

Volume 2, *The Call of Earth*, covers only 1 Nephi 7, focusing on the character of Sariah (Rasa) and the women who become wives for Lehi’s sons and Laban’s servant Zoram (Zdorab). Volume 3, *The Ships of Earth*, 1 Nephi 8–17, takes the group on a journey of some years southeast through the desert, including Lehi’s “Tree of Life” vision and emphasizing marriage and
children and the struggle between Nephi and Laman—then a Liahona-led move to Bountiful (Dostatok). Volume 4, *Earthfall*, 1 Nephi 18–2 Nephi 5, tells of the building of one viable space-ship from parts of those left by the original colonists and the voyage (interrupted by a “storm,” another violent clash between the brothers) to America (Earth), where they find no humans but two races of intelligent life akin to huge bats (called “angels”) and huge rats (called “diggers”). Lehi dies and the two groups separate into Nephites (Nafari), allied with the angels, and Lamanites (Elemari), allied with some of the diggers, while Nephi and Jacob (Oykib) begin to keep two records.

The last volume, *The People of Earth*, Words of Mormon and Mosiah, skips forward 500 years to tell the story of Alma (Akma) the son of the high priest Alma (Akmaro) and his friends, the sons of King Mosiah (Motiak), who rebel against the religion of equality between humans, angels, and diggers, taught by their fathers. Finally, they are confronted by a messenger from Christ (the Keeper of Earth), who unlike the Oversoul is not a computer and speaks much more subtly, in dreams. The Keeper seems to have greater respect for agency than the Oversoul and has inspired its humble followers (the Kept) with assurance that, if they are faithful, it will someday visit them in person.

Card’s purpose, I believe, is the same as that of the Book of Mormon, to convince “Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations,” but to do so indirectly, through an entertaining story that is not resisted because of prejudice about Mormonism or Christ but instead is able to move all readers with the “transformative power” of Mormon Christian ethics and doctrine. The ethics he focuses on is unconditional love and honesty—versions of what Lowell Bennion has called the two basic religious virtues, mercy and integrity. Card makes his whole series a continuing investigation of enormous relevance to contemporary Mormon as well as more general human struggles with sexism, racism, even homophobia and anti-handicapped prejudice, and at the same time he constantly explores crucial doctrinal questions concerning the nature of agency, revelation, spiritual experience, and priestly authority.
Let me just review some highlights to look for as you read these entertaining and valuable books. Card confronts directly the cultural gender bias of the Book of Mormon by not only making Rasa (Sariah) as interesting and powerful a spiritual leader as Wetchik (Lehi) but by creating a host of other women of enormous (and very believable) vitality, intelligence, human fallibility, religious force and insight, and importance to the story. He creates a culture where the male sexism of the Hebraic culture is present but confronted with opposed, female-centered cultural traditions in a way that reveals the weaknesses of both extremes and provides Card a way, in the exploration of the courtship and marriage of Wetchik (Lehi) and his sons, to reveal the problems of gender bias and suggest solutions.

Basilica (Jerusalem) is actually ruled by women, whose authority derives from their ability to be inspired by the Oversoul (whom they call "she") and use her power to heal and prophesy. Rasa (Sariah) is the most prestigious teacher among the women, and her two students, Luet and Hushidh, daughters of a wild prophetess from the desert, are powerful seers who become the wives of Nafai and Issib (Sam). Wetchik (Lehi) is part of the male religious cult, which is focused on sacrifice, even of the men's own pain and blood, to appease the Oversoul (whom they call "he").

Using some information he has learned about baboon societies and the survival requirements of nomadic societies, Card sets up some very challenging discussions and interactions among his characters that suggest that male superiority is an artifact of less civilized cultures and destructive of honesty, tenderness, and spiritual cooperation in marriage; that female withdrawal into its own sexism is a natural (and ultimately unsatisfactory) reaction to male sexism; that the gender we impose on God tells us more about ourselves than about God; and that male dominance in religion is always a tempting reversion but one that neglects the spiritual gifts of women and undermines the health of the whole religion and its society.

Card sets up some wonderful scenes for these explorations: Nafai suffering an anxiety attack as he considers marrying someone more spiritually powerful than himself (2:124–26); Elemak (Laman) explaining to Rasa the facts of male dominance
outside of civilization (3:43-44); Rasa confronting her husband when he names two rivers after the first two boys rather than children born on the journey (3:285-87) and him insisting on his right—but soon after, in a conciliatory move, naming a river after her, though the tension between men and women continues (3:294-95).

Perhaps the most painful, instructive, and moving scene concerning gender is one where Nafai, spurred by true dreams given to his wife and daughter, consults the Index and determines on a way to find the carefully hidden site of the ancient starships—but almost sets off without sharing his insight and intentions with his wife. She confronts him; he reacts in angry defensiveness (“Don’t you ever tell me again that because I don’t act like a woman wants me to act, that makes me an animal”); and she tells him the crucial truth: “Being civilized means transcending your own animal nature. Not indulging it, not glorying in it. That’s how you remind me of a male baboon—because you can’t be civilized as long as you treat women like something to be bullied. You can only be civilized when you treat us like friends” (3:324).

The two slowly, painfully, forgive each other, and that volume ends with a transcendent vision of what Nafai has learned from his wife, as he returns with the powerful electronic mantle of the Starmaster (which enables him to shock and repel the murderous Elemak and Mebbekew) and that night holds Luet: “She was willing to make love, if he wanted to. But all he wanted tonight was to touch her, to hold her. To share the dancing light of the cloak with her, so she could also remember all the things that he remembered from the mind of the Oversoul. So she could see into his heart as clearly as he saw into hers, and know his love for her as surely as he knew her love for him.

“The light from the cloak grew and brightened. He kissed her forehead, and when his lips came away, he could see that a faint light also sparked on her. It will grow, he knew. It will grow until there is no difference between us. Let there be no barrier between us, Luet, my love. I never want to be alone again.”

In his “Open Letter” Card tells how he “loved the Book of Mormon from childhood on” and brought to the writing of Homecoming “the same love for the book, the same respect for it,
the same reverence, and the same sense of passion and vitality that I have drawn from the book since I first heard [its] stories at my parents' feet. . . . I felt it was important . . . to make the story just as real and rich for women readers as for men, and therefore I caused the prophetic, spiritual role to be shared equally among characters of both sexes” (“Open Letter,” p. 12). I think he succeeded in showing “reverence” and creating “passion and vitality” in good part because of that decision to make the book equally rich for both sexes. And he does indeed create a marvelous range of fascinating (oops!) women, from the nymphomaniac wife of Mebbekew (Lemuel) and the misguided but courageous wife of Elemak (Laman) (she is the one whom Card imagines pleading successfully for Nephi's life when his brothers attack him early in the desert journey, 1 Nephi 7:19) to the great leader Rasa and the spiritually gifted Luet and Hushidh—and their descendants who inherit their powers much later, the sisters of Akma and Mon (Ammon).

One of the most interesting women is Shedemei, a formidably intelligent scientist whom the Oversoul brings along to care for the frozen seeds and plants for regenerating useful plant life on the destroyed Earth. She proves herself and becomes the one, Nafai learns, who would be chosen next if he fails his calling—and in fact, when the Nafari escape to the Land of Nafai, she becomes the second Starmaster, kept alive in the orbiting spaceship through suspended animation, occasionally waking to help the Oversoul nurture the gardens of Earth and shepherd its people until she becomes the messenger who confronts Akma and the Sons of Motiak in the name of the Keeper of Earth. But first (and apparently as part of her trial) Shedemei is the wife chosen for Zdorab (Zoram), which provides Card with another vector into tolerance, because Zdorab, it turns out, is a homosexual.

Card is unpredictable (and certainly not “politically correct”) on this matter. He reprints in Storyteller his famous essay from Sunstone, “The Hypocrites of Homosexuality,” in which he condemns the “homosexual community,” including Mormon homosexuals who “instead of repenting of homosexuality, wish it to become an acceptable behavior in the society of the Saints” (p. 184); and he adds an addendum about the strong reaction of some to that essay, including accusations of “homophobia” and
attempts to censor him. My own sense is that the essay is neither homophobic nor a candidate for censorship but that, despite Card’s effort in it to distinguish between same-sex orientation and sinful sexual acts outside of marriage, his strongly emotive language, unfortunate stereotypes, and imprecise language (see the quotation above, where “homosexuality,” elsewhere a condition, suddenly becomes a behavior to be “repented”) tend to encourage the current tendency, even among Mormons, to confuse the condition and the behavior and to bash gays, verbally and even physically.

However, in *Homecoming*, Card gives us a very sympathetic homosexual person, one who is able to speak eloquently of his condition as exactly that, a condition rather than a choice, and describe the violent (even murderous) prejudice he and others like him (including one of his lovers) had experienced back in Basilica. He movingly reports the humiliation of having to cultivate a persona as “the most unnoticeable, despicable, spineless being” in order to survive in this male-dominant desert troop of near-baboons—which sometimes sounds much like our own society. Card also has Zdorab, chosen by the Oversoul to be the mate of the only remaining female, Shedemei, whose lack of traditional beauty and shyness makes her think no one will want her, gradually, over months, learn to open to her and show his strength and goodness and accept her—and they marry, at first simply for mutual protection and friendship.

Later Zdorab discovers in the Index evidence that homosexuality is not genetic but “just the level of male hormones in the mother’s blood stream at the time the hypothalamus goes through its active differentiation and growth” (3:170), which is pretty much in line with our present science and shows that Card, contrary to many Mormons, believes homosexuality can’t simply be “repented of” or removed with some kind of therapy. Zdorab decides he wants to be part of the biologic chain, part of the tree of life Wetchik has seen in vision; then, in wonderful scenes of difficult tenderness and pain and exploration, he and Shedemei decide to bear children and succeed—Zdorab even stating quite persuasively that he has been caught in “the great net of life” because, despite being pointed away from it at birth he had “chosen to be caught, who is to say that mine is not the better
fatherhood, because I acted out of pure love, and not out of some inborn instinct that captured me. Indeed, I acted against my instinct... Anybody can pilot his boat to shore in a fair wind; I have come to shore by tacking in contrary winds, by rowing against an ebbing tide" (3:252).

Card is not suggesting, and I certainly am not, that this is the only or best “solution” for homosexuals—the tragedies in Mormon culture of homosexuals who married, out of guilt or ignorance or hope, and damaged not only their own lives but those of many others are well known; what Card has done is give us a deeply sympathetic homosexual person, whose story can help us learn understanding and mercy through the imagination.

When Shakespeare wants to teach important lessons in understanding and mercy, he does not simply provide easy cases. He doesn’t just give us a good person being treated unmercifully and say, “See how wrong that is.” He gives us a bad person, one who doesn’t deserve any mercy—like Claudius in Hamlet—and then shows the terrible results when his protagonist, the one we identify with, turns away from mercy (with us cheering him on) toward revenge. Card does something similar in teaching tolerance. He doesn’t give us nice people of other races and suggest it would be nice to be nice to them; he gives us monsters, intelligent species that look like insects or hamsters—or in this case bats and rats—and shows his human characters struggling to know, love, and ultimately sacrifice for these alien others.

A dramatic shift occurred in the history of Mormon letters—and modern science fiction—when Card, in 1984, rewrote his award-winning first story from seven years before into Ender’s Game. He took a combination coming-of-age and computerized-spacewar story with a great surprise ending and made it into a profoundly serious novel about unconditional love for the “other”; and by making his hero into a “speaker for the dead,” a man whose guilt about xenocide, destroying a whole race of aliens, moves him to give his life to telling their story and eventually becoming a savior, Card began to transform himself into a speaker for the dead and different, an interpreter and defender of little-known and often misunderstood lives—including Mormon lives. Ender’s Game and its sequel, Speaker for the Dead, swept the two top sci-fi awards, the Nebula and Hugo,
two years running, and their sequel, *Xenocide*, as well as Card’s realistic novel about a contemporary Mormon family, *Lost Boys*, both received the award for best novel from the Association of Mormon Letters.

Card continues his Shakespearean device for teaching tolerance in *Homecoming*. Even early in Volume 2, the people on Harmony most sensitive to the Oversoul begin having dreams that the Oversoul itself can’t understand—because they come from the Keeper of Earth. They are dreams of batlike and ratlike creatures, of human size and intelligence, interacting in strange ways with each other and the dreamers. When the voyagers finally reach Earth, they soon find that such creatures literally exist, having evolved from bats and rats in the 40 million years since humans left. The fourth volume is in good part the story of how Nafai and his followers help and learn from and are helped by the “sky-people” and “earth-people” and how Elemak and his followers manipulate and use and finally unite with some of the more violent “diggers.” The fifth volume tells how five hundred years later the inhabitants of Darakemba (Zarahemla)—and those who left with Zenifab (Zeniff) and were divided into the followers of Ilihiak (Limhi) and Akma (Alma) until they are brought back by the Oversoul to Darakemb—have almost all reverted to both sexism and racism.

As a crucial measure of their increasing apostasy under the influence of the younger Akma, they become increasingly unable to live as a religious society of true equality. He even turns the innocent envy his friend Mon (Ammon) has for the sky-people (which allows Card to provide a nice touch for his Mormon readers when Mon exclaims, “Oh, that I had the wings of an angel!”) into prejudice against earth-people. As the elder Akma, who had been converted by Binadi, puts it to King Motiak during their sons’ rebellion, “I warned you from the start that it would be very hard to take this people from a place where diggers were hated and enslaved, where women were kept silent in public life, and where the poor had no rights against the rich, to a place where all were equal in the eyes of the Keeper and the law” (5:MS186). Card makes the parallel to our own time obvious by having one of the younger Akma’s followers call out to Shedemei, who has returned to earth to set an example of equality in a school where
women teach and the earth-people as well as humans and sky-people attend, "Digger-lover!"

Card clearly indicates, in an earlier volume, what is at stake religiously when he has Nafai request to have replayed for him his father's dream of the "Tree of Life," which has come from the Keeper of Earth but been recorded by the Oversoul. (Card does some interesting speculation about what it would be like to experience another's emotions along with their vision; the experience of tasting the fruit is so physically painful and terrifying that Nafai nearly goes mad [3:175-76].) Afterwards, while contemplating the dream, Nafai is visited by Yobar, a baboon he has befriended who asks for food—and is changed, in a waking dream, the first Nafai has had from the Keeper of Earth, into a winged creature and then into a huge rat, whom Nafai gives some of the fruit of the tree and who gives it to his companions, who lay down their weapons of stone at Nafai's feet. He wakes, in deep yearning, to find Yobar still near; he gives him the body of a hare he had killed earlier, which Yobar can use to ingratiate himself back into the baboon troop: "Buy what you can with this hare's blood, my friend. I've seen the face of the Keeper of Earth, and it was you" (3:182). This fundamental Christian theme, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these," is continued 500 years later when some thugs in Darakemba, spurred on by Akma's rebellion, break the wings of two young angels; Akma's sister, named after the ancient Luet and like her a Seer, mourns, "The Keeper will never send her true child into the world when we still do things like this" (5:MS194).

Card is, as the scene of the dream of the tree of life shows, profoundly interested in the religious as well as the moral dimensions of personality. He dwells at length and usefully on perhaps the two most difficult aspects of Nephi's character: his combination of righteousness and self-righteousness in relation to Laman and Lemuel and his combination of anguished contrition and anxious certainty about the killing of Laban. (At one point the Oversoul tells Nafai straight out, after one of his confrontations with the brothers: "Every time I speak to you, they hate you more. Every time your father's face is filled with delight at your quick mind, at your goodness of heart, they hate you more. And when they see that you desire to have the privileges of
the eldest son..." Nafai interrupts, "I don’t want to replace Elemak... I want him to love me, I want him to be a true older brother to me, and not this monster who wants me dead," and the Oversoul comes back, "Yes you want him to love you... and you want him to respect you... and you want to take his place. ... [You] will never be content unless your life is accomplishing something that will change the world" [2:122-23].

Perhaps most moving are Card’s ability to convey the yearning of basically good people to repent and be better, to hear the voice of divinity and respond, and then his ability to give a sense of what that delicious fruit tastes like. This is Shedemei, as described in a conversation with the Keeper of Earth in a dream, in which Shedemei has been called to be the messenger to confront Akma the younger and the sons of Motiak: "Until you made this visit to Earth [the Keeper tells her], I wasn’t sure if you were truly part of me, because I didn’t know if you loved the people enough to share my work. You’re not the same person you were when I first called you here. . . . Your work has changed, and now it’s the same as my work. To teach the people of Earth how to live, on and on, generation to generation; and how to make that life joyful and free. You made your choice, and so now, like [Akma the elder], I can give you what you want, because I know that you desire only the joy of these people, forever. . . . I know what you do; I know why you do it; I can name you more truly than you can name yourself.

"For a moment, Shedemei could see herself reaching up and plucking a white fruit from a tree; she tasted it, and the flavor of it filled her body with light and she could fly, she could sing all songs at once and they were endlessly beautiful inside her. She knew what the fruit was—it was the love of the Keeper for the people of Earth. The white fruit was a taste of the Keeper’s joy. Yet also in the flavor of it was something else, the tang, the sharp pain of millions, the billions of people who could not understand what the Keeper wanted for them, or who, understanding, hated it and rejected her interference in their lives. . . . Thus even in rejecting the Keeper’s plan they became a part of it; in refusing to taste the fruit of the tree, they became part of its exquisite flavor. . . . Their hubris mattered, even though in the long flow of burning history it changed nothing. It mattered because the
Keeper loved them and remembered them and knew their names and their stories and mourned for them: O my daughter, O my son, you are also part of me, the Keeper cried out to them. You are part of my endless yearning, and I will never forget you—

"And the emotions became too much for Shedemei. She had dwelt in the Keeper's mind for as long as she could bear. She awoke sobbing violently, overwhelmed, overcome. Awoke and uttered a long mournful cry of unspeakable grief—grief for the lost ones, grief for having had to leave the mind of the Keeper, grief because the taste of the white fruit was gone from her lips... Here I am more alone than I ever was before because for the first time in my life I had the experience of being not alone and I never knew, I never knew how beautiful it was to be truly, wholly known and loved" (5:MS242-43).

Akma the younger has another kind of spiritual awareness of not being alone after he begins to recover from the shock nigh unto death Shedemei gives him as the emissary of the Keeper and he chooses life rather than continued spiritual death: "Underneath [all] there was something else. A sense that someone was watching everything that happened... A constant judge, assessing the moral value of what he was doing. How could he now remember something that he hadn't noticed at the time? And yet he knew without doubt that this watcher had been there at the time, and that he loved this voice inside him" (5:MS256).

Card seems to me to be one who speaks with unique authority of the spiritual and moral values of Mormon faith because he, like Akma, has that voice inside him and lives as well as writes by it. Yes, he can get carried away toward intolerance by his own hurts and enthusiasms—as when he creates a parody of the malicious academic intellectual in Bego, the teacher who leads Akma astray. But in the current climate of divisiveness and intolerance and even defamation in the Mormon intellectual community he remains a model for all of us. For instance, he dedicates *Storyteller* "To Scott Kenney, with love, respect, and gratitude." Kenney was the founding editor of *Sunstone* magazine and the first editor of Signature books, both of which Card has published with and about which he and Kenney often "did not see eye to eye": "We knew that even in disagreement, we were both trying in good faith to contribute some truth and light, as best we could understand it, to
the community of Saints. It was a time of sacrifice, and Scott more than anyone else I know gave selflessly to the Mormon community—even at times when some members of the Mormon community weren’t quite sure they wanted to accept the gifts he was offering” (*Storyteller* p. 213).

Card then thanks Elbert Peck, current editor of *Sunstone*, for responding a few years ago to Card’s criticism of some things in *Sunstone*, not with defensiveness but an invitation to write the kinds of things Card would like to see there—so he did, for a column, “A Changed Man,” from which some of the essays in *Storyteller* are reprinted: “I remain of the opinion that Elbert Peck is a genuinely fair-minded editor who truly cares about the Mormon community and seeks to help the Mormon people to grow. May his tribe increase” (p. 215).

Amen. And may the tribe of “Card” increase, people who love the Book of Mormon and can both defend its historicity and explore its fictional power with devotion to its central message of Christ-like mercy and love—rather than fear—of diversity.