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- Abstract** While scholars have given much attention to the differences between the Sermon on the Mount as it appears in the New Testament and as it appears in 3 Nephi in order to demonstrate what the Book of Mormon appears to restore, we have underdeveloped theoretical understandings of what it means to find moments of perfect coincidence between the two accounts. Using Jorge Luis Borges’s classic 1939 short story, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” and Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics as illustrative points of comparison, this essay explores a theory of revelation that helps us to account for both revelation’s divine force as well as for the historicity of the reader’s imagination that brings revelation to bear on lived experience. Ultimately, the essay argues that the coincidence of language makes an implicit argument for revelation as continual.
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Reading and the Menardian Paradox in 3 Nephi

George B. Handley

IN THE OLD WORLD JESUS TAUGHT, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled” (Matthew 5:6), yet in the New World he says, “Blessed are all they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled with the Holy Ghost” (3 Nephi 12:6). Attention, understandably, has been given to the differences, large and small, between the Sermon on the Mount as recounted in the New Testament and the similar sermon given in the New World. At times, we note slight shifts in emphasis (here in the New World, for example, Jesus makes this promise to “all”), more complete understandings (we are filled specifically with the influence of the Holy Ghost), and so on. And these differences raise compelling questions about the possibility that plain and precious truths were lost in translation in the Bible but are restored again in the Book of Mormon. The differences might also suggest the importance of a shifting context that moves Jesus to vary his speech. One wonders if one version is more authoritative than the other. But there is an additional question the two accounts of Christ’s sermon raise. What do readers make of the fact that in most cases the wording is exactly coincident? What might that signify? For example, Jesus tells his listeners in the Old World that “blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy” (Matthew 5:7). He tells his audience in the New World, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (3 Nephi 12: 7). The punctuational differences aside, are we to

assume a meaning that is precisely coincident in both contexts? Might the same language spoken in different places and in different moments in time necessarily shift, even if only slightly, in meaning? What are we to make of the facts that both statements in standard King James English are not the original language spoken in either case and that the two original languages are dramatically different? What ultimately does the occasional overlap and coincidence with the Bible in the Book of Mormon ask of readers exactly?

Here I focus on the repetition of the Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi in order to offer a literary and theological reflection on the Book of Mormon itself. My question concerns not the content of the sermon so much as the moral stakes of reading scripture, and especially of reading Mormon scripture, which I take to be scripture that places special emphasis on its own weaknesses, textuality, and constructedness. Taking as my companion Jorge Luis Borges, I argue that these features (which exercise both the Book of Mormon's defenders and its attackers) are necessary to the theological meaning of the text rather than difficulties that need to be explained. I suggest they highlight an essential meaning of the act of reading scripture germane to a theology of continuing revelation.

Pierre Menard and scripture

The great Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges wrote what may be his most famous story, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," in 1939 to restore an understanding of the central paradox of what it means to read. The story is a mock scholarly article about a fictional early twentieth-century French writer by the name of Pierre Menard.¹ Lost among Menard's many accomplishments, claims the fictional scholar, are fragments of an attempt to write *Don Quixote*, the novel already written by the great seventeenth-century Spanish author, Miguel de

1. Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 36–44.

Cervantes. The narrator clarifies that this was not an attempt to put the character of Don Quixote in contemporary garb, like some modern adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* set in Los Angeles. Adaptations merely “produce the plebeian pleasure of anachronism or (what is worse) to enthrall us with the elementary idea that all epochs are the same or are different.”² Instead, Menard’s project was to do something quite different—something seemingly impossible.

I will come back to that impossible task in a moment. First, I want to highlight here Borges’s hesitation in deciding whether anachronism signals that all epochs are the same or whether it signals that all epochs are different. I want to suggest that this conundrum is central not only to understanding Borges’s story but to what it might mean to read scripture. I insist that the question of how historical, geographical, and cultural contexts shape the way we write and read is ultimately undecidable, even though those contexts are undeniably relevant to how we arrive at understandings of textual meaning. Let me explain. On one hand, we might be tempted to emphasize context, as the one-time school of reader response theory did, and insist that all readings are produced primarily or even solely by the context of the reader. To do so is to insist on the radical and perpetual *difference* between any two given moments in time and any two readers. But for Borges, this point is obvious and even boring. There is no denying that the reader’s situation shapes a text’s meaning according to her needs and desires and that any two readers will read differently as a result, but if we cannot distinguish between a good and a bad reading, we must concede that all readings are misreadings and are all equally off target. If this were the case, why would we want to insist on the difference, for example, between wresting the scriptures and likening them unto ourselves? According to the prophets, interpretation of scripture is a moral act—we might get it right and we might get it woefully wrong. Indeed, we will be judged by the books God has given us. And if meaning were *merely* produced by readerly context, then there would be no possibility of transcendent

2. Borges, *Labyrinths*, 39.

value in texts—let alone, in the case of scripture, of any revelation from God to human beings. Texts would only mean what people think they mean, and all people would have equal claim on interpretation, regardless of the text. Hence, to reduce a text's meaning merely to its various interpretations in the hands of its thousands of readers is to render all textual meaning and all texts equal under the omnipotent and unbending law of context. Scripture would then hold no special privilege over any other kind of literature, be it a magazine advertisement or a novel by William Faulkner. On such a view, the only way to enrich reading would be to be aware of our own historical entrapment as readers. As readers, we would have the critical obligation to historicize and secularize everything, paying attention solely to the subtle and subconscious ways in which all readers—ourselves included—hide their willful interpretations under the guise of transcendent meaning.

It would initially seem, then, that if we are invested in a belief of the special nature of scripture, as is presumably any believing reader of the Book of Mormon, we must resist reader response theory categorically. But, of course, to insist instead that meaning is always contained solely in the text itself, or that it is no more or no less than the author's intentions, is to slide into the other extreme rejected by Borges, according to which all epochs are indeed the same. If all epochs and all cultures are the same, why should we need new revelations? Such a position disregards all the ways in which language, culture, historical experience, and beliefs shape and guide the kinds of questions we as readers or writers bring to texts. And this places our own judgment beyond reproach by denying the relevance of our moment and place in a culture and in historical time. Such a philosophy of reading seems almost ashamed of our humanity and places hope in scripture as a categorical escape from it. It is not surprising that such attitudes are often accompanied by a general suspicion of or disinterest in all forms of secular literature, even the "best books" we are told we ought to seek out, since such literature is not believed to offer a similar power of escape. Thus, in an effort to save scripture from the claims of reader response theory, we might end up mistakenly insisting on an exceptional view of sacred writ

and drawing an overly firm line between the divine word and human will. Fundamentalists and relativists alike find a belief in the similarities between literature and scripture threatening, since such a belief threatens to confuse categories of values essential for their respective projects of interpretation.

I want to insist, with Borges, that at both extremes—one we might call radically fundamentalist and the other radically relativist—we create an untraversable abyss between the sacred and the secular, leaving us mistakenly self-assured that we see a radical (and essentially knowable) distinction between that which comes from God and that which comes from human beings. I would argue that such a sharp dichotomy between the timeless and the timely is unacceptable from the perspective of Latter-day Saint theology, a theology that insists on the need for continuing revelation, on more prophets and more books yet to come from peoples and cultures who have not yet joined the chorus of testimonies we have thus far heard. We might call LDS theology *dynamically orthodox*. We adhere to what we have received not out of fear of competing and inimical claims on truth but in anticipation of what is yet to be revealed.

Let's return to the passage from Borges to see if it might enlighten us further. His narrator explains that Menard's task differs from what these extremes represent. Menard's goal, it turns out, is not to produce *another* Quixote, "but *the Quixote itself*. Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes."³ Menard himself thinks of this task, so much more interesting than the task of producing mere anachronism or of inhabiting either of the extremes criticized above, as akin to the work of metaphysicians who labor to produce an indisputable affirmation of a transcendent truth, except that in his case there will be no publication of the "intermediary stages" of his labor. All Menard can offer to the

3. Borges, *Labyrinths*, 39.

world is his text as final proof of the mysterious process by which he was able to produce the same words. At first he thinks he can accomplish his aims simply by trying to *be Cervantes*, but then he realizes that the real challenge would be to produce such coincidence in language *as Pierre Menard*—to find the meeting ground between his world and the world of Cervantes through a production of identical words. Even though it appears he was successful in producing at least part of the same text, the fictional scholar/narrator points out the irony that the perfect coincidence between the *words* produced by Menard and the words originally produced by Cervantes only highlights their very different *meanings*, since the words are produced in radically different contexts. The narrator cites two identical passages, one from Cervantes and the other from Menard, and concludes that the passage produced by Menard is full of greater irony and meaning. His reasoning? It cannot be for nothing that three centuries of Western history have transpired between Cervantes and Menard. The same words will only reverberate as different meanings due to the considerable changes of time and place that shape how those words are interpreted.

The Menardian paradox is therefore that the achievement of coincidence and sameness of language—an achievement that has relied on an extraordinary level of devotion to and not mere mechanical reproduction of the original text—not only does not escape the difference of context but in fact highlights it in order to produce new meaning. What Borges's story underscores in its rhetorical position as an academic article is “the halting and rudimentary art of reading: this new technique is that of the deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution.”⁴ Menard's ambition might only be a possibility in the realm of ironic fiction, yet it is certainly what happens every time a reader picks up a text. Reading enacts an exact coincidence of language between the written word and the read word, especially when it is read carefully and devotedly; the same words echo in the mind of a writer and of a reader no matter how many centuries might have transpired in the meantime.

4. Borges, *Labyrinths*, 44.

(Unless of course it is a translation, but Borges insists that reading *is* translation, in any case, as we will see.) Because reading always produces new meanings, reading always makes of the text, as the narrator points out is the case with Menard's Quixote, "a kind of palimpsest" in which the traces of earlier readings are faintly visible on the text.⁵ In the Borgesian universe, the reader becomes aware of the impossibility of plumbing the depths of a text to the point of arriving at ground zero of the word's origin. All readings are rereadings, as all writings are translations. That is, every reader has left her mark on the text—every reading a new rewriting of earlier layers—which blurs the distinction between author and reader.

For this reason, Borges once wrote in a preface to a book of his own poems, "If the pages of this book contain some well-crafted verse, may the reader forgive my daring in having composed it before him. We are all one; our trifles are of little import, and circumstances influence our souls to such a degree that it is almost a chance occurrence that you are the reader and I the writer—the diffident and zealous writer—of my verses."⁶ Far from creating a universe of relativism, this stunning disavowal of the notion of authenticity and originality places the transcendent value and meaning of the text beyond the individual reach of the author and of any one reader. If it bothers us to have to demystify an author's "genius" in this way, it also grants us hope that we too as readers have the opportunity, even the responsibility, to be coparticipants, cocreators of genius or transcendent meaning. Untouched by genius or by holiness, the reader can scarcely perceive genius or identify revelation in another. But in this model, the text is the catalyst that spurs all readers to become cocreators of the text's meaning and value. This implies that "the creative process is essentially a reading" and therefore that "only through an act of interpretation can that which is postulated take on meaning."⁷ Truth needs a revelator as much as it needs

5. Borges, *Labyrinths*, 44.

6. Jorge Luis Borges, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969).

7. Steven Matthews, "Jorge Luis Borges: Fiction and Reading," *Ariel* 6 (Spring 1989): 63.

a translator or interpreter. And this creative process happens both at the moment of creation as well as in the moment of reading, according to Borges. Hence, “meaning develops from the twofold relation of the interpreter: to a literary dream world *and* to historical context.”⁸

All of this, of course, bears on scripture. When we consider divine meaning, revealed from God to human beings, we might feel tempted to conclude that God’s word is invulnerable to the shifting prisms of time, change, language, and culture. Yet a Latter-day Saint understanding of revelation embraces the ironies and accents of changing context because of the way in which the dialectic between God’s revealed word and human beings’ mimetic word ignites a process of ongoing revelation. The novelty of revelation, from the LDS perspective, is not just dependent on God’s will and his intercession in the human cultural context through prophets; it is dependent also on every reader, who in what Anthony Cascardi calls the “adjectival moments of thought” marks with his own accent of interpretation new meanings of the Word.⁹ Indeed it is precisely this refraction of God’s word caused by the contingencies of our reading moment that generates the need for a new revelation that we make possible by faithful reading. But this is not an argument for a free-for-all, every reader for himself. What exposes the differences between contexts and therefore the deeper meanings of new readings is not an insistence on absolute relativism but paradoxically *the desire to see the sacred word’s meaning as the same for all time and all places*. Without that desire to read attentively and devotedly and bring old words and phrases into the new context of our lives, we would not see the gap between earthly meaning and heavenly truth. However, without an acceptance of the inevitable distance between our understanding and God’s, without an abdication of the claim to know the mind of God precisely and completely, we would stand no chance of advancing in our understanding of truth. This is because we would always assume that our current understanding of God

8. Matthews, “Borges: Fiction and Reading,” 66, emphasis added.

9. Anthony J. Cascardi, “Mimesis and Modernism,” in *Literary Philosophers: Borges, Calvino, Eco*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia, Carolyn Korsmeyer, and Rodolphe Gasché (New York: Routledge, 2002), 123.

is sufficient. I suspect that such an assumption is part of what it means to worship a God after our own image.

Confirmations from 3 Nephi

So how does this pertain to 3 Nephi, as my title suggests it must? Critics and defenders of the Book of Mormon have tended to divide along the lines described above, that is, into polar opposite definitions of the sacred and secular. Arguably, this is because the book seems to ask us to conclude one of two things. On the one hand, we might conclude that the Book of Mormon is the work of a human being and is therefore in need of a radical historicization that would expose its human authorship, by Joseph Smith. We might read it, in other words, merely as Joseph's psychology and his moment in time writ large. The book might also delude the believing reader by becoming nothing more than her psychology and her moment of time writ large. This explains the search for the nineteenth-century context evident in the text and the accusation that believing readers are just projecting their own will onto the text. On the other hand, however, we might be tempted to argue alternatively that the Book of Mormon stands outside of time and history, a narrative that comes from the heavens without the taint of circumstance, such that every believing reader is given, by means of passive reception, the entirety of its transcendent meaning. This second conclusion, of course, places the book in a category entirely apart from all other books, even from the Bible, since it is not as vulnerable to the degradations of time and the hand of man. I would argue that coming to either of these conclusions is a mistake; the book offers itself as an enigma, a fusion of two seemingly impossible choices. A reading that combines devotion to God's Word with the creative energies of interpretation reveals textual structures that turn us into Menardian readers. In this way, a third possibility emerges that resolves the apparent enigma.

For a sacred work of literature, the Book of Mormon is unusually preoccupied with its own historicity and textuality, yet it seems that a great number of its believing readers fail to acknowledge the relevance

of *our* historicity as readers. That is, if we are reluctant to consider how our cultural and historical circumstances have shaped our understandings of the book's textual meanings, we might go to the extreme of denying the relevance of our particular time and place to whatever God reveals to us. This amounts to a denial of the very need of revelation in the particularities of our circumstances. Alternatively, the book's disbelieving readers argue that its meaning can be reduced to the story of Joseph Smith's time and his psychology, delimiting the text by whatever historians can verify. Such an approach, to put it bluntly, replaces God with the historian as the one voice who stands outside of time and orders chaos into meaning without accountability. In the former case, the reader treats the narrative's claims of historical origins as untouchable, paradoxically above history but ultimately determinative of the text's truth; we escape our historical condition categorically because of revelation, and the only salvation is to know as much of God's word as possible. In the latter case, the reader treats the historian's construction of the past as sacred, as the untouchable, unquestioned determinative source of the text's meaning; all knowledge, in other words, can be reduced to our historical condition, and the only salvation is to know as much history as possible. But both readers would seem to miss one of the central paradoxes of Christ, which lies at the very heart of what revelation means: that God is revealed *in mortal flesh* as our brother, that his eternal and life-giving words come to us from a particular moment in time and space and language. That is, Christ's meaning as Savior is, in the more mundane sense of the word, *a translated being*. He has translated himself into our human context to make himself understood, and we must still translate him again, reread him as it were, so as to establish the grounds of his relevance to our individual lives.

What if the meaning of revelation is always instantiated by a particular moment in time and place, and what if its meaning receives another layer from each encounter by a new reader? Would this mean that revelation becomes purely secular and historicized every time? Or might this signify that revelation is perpetually necessary, that our failures to finally and completely transcend our historical circumstances open a window that grants glimpses of the mind of God as so much more broad, profound,

and universal than our own feeble minds can conceive? This glimpse into heaven requires our obedience and submission to the portion of God's truth we have been given, but not because this portion is all there is or all that we will receive; rather, it is because the frontiers of truth remain open and subject to further rereadings, illuminations, and iterations. It is certainly true that the inherent ambiguity of such a view of transcendence as always grounded on the earth and never entirely free of the contingencies of human context seems oxymoronic and often proves too much for believers and nonbelievers alike. However, we do not need to dismiss the legitimacy of United States-based readings of the Book of Mormon to suggest that we can anticipate revolutions in our understanding of the book when it is read by generations of Africans, Muslims, or Chinese. This kind of readerly responsibility can be troubling because it places a degree of responsibility for interpretation that most readers would prefer to abdicate: the responsibility Oliver Cowdery faced when he was instructed to "study . . . out in [his] mind" what God might be saying (D&C 9:8). Let us remember that the words he sought to translate were written in a language he could not read. We can only suppose that the Lord was not only calling for Cowdery's faith but for his imagination, his personality, his mind. The Lord anticipates how we interpret, in any case. He tells us that when he speaks, he speaks in order to correct us "in [our] weakness, after the manner of [our] language, that [we] might come to understanding" (D&C 1:24).

It is hard not to hear the hint that even divine language is not merely the transfer of information but a poetic reformation of a higher idea. A common distinction in literary criticism is made between poetic language that recognizes its own limitations and weaknesses and thus opens us up to new possibilities of meaning and propagandist language that seeks to hide its origins and contingencies in order to close down such possibilities. The great American author Toni Morrison, for example, in her 1993 Nobel acceptance speech, praises Lincoln's Gettysburg Address for liberating rather than controlling or limiting meaning by its use of poetic strategies:

Refusing to monumentalize, disdaining the “final word,” the precise “summing up,” acknowledging their “poor power to add or detract,” his words signal deference to the uncapturability of the life it mourns. It is the deference that moves [us], that recognition that language can never live up to life once and for all. Nor should it. Language can never “pin down” slavery, genocide, war [or for that matter the mind and will of God]. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable.¹⁰

Morrison’s words here ring true. At the same time, unfortunately, and perhaps in response to the intolerance and dogmatism of many forms of belief, she gives religious language as one of several examples of a language that, instead of acknowledging its weakness, seeks to limit and control in ways not unlike the language of political and commercial propaganda.

Of course, Morrison’s criticism of religious language is not uncommon. Indeed, it is usually assumed that religious faith is inconsistent with tolerance, patience, humility, and self-questioning or open-mindedness and that sacred texts do not exhibit these humble and poetic qualities of language. This is certainly not the sense one has from the Book of Mormon, however, and here I return again to 3 Nephi. One of the most sacred moments of the book is when Jesus prays for those in his presence and the hearers do not bear witness to what he spoke but rather to the ineffable and undeniable power of his words. The most explicit, literal, physical evidence of God’s love for humankind in the New World, this prayer is arguably the very heart of what the Book of Mormon witnesses, yet after so much narrative, preaching, and prophesying, there remains an emphatic denial of the capacity of any human sense to capture the essence of God’s love for humankind: “The eye hath never seen, neither hath the ear heard, before, so great and marvelous things as we saw and heard Jesus speak unto the Father; and no tongue can speak, neither can there be written by any man, neither can the hearts of men conceive so great and marvelous things as we both saw and heard Jesus speak; and

10. Toni Morrison, “Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993,” *The Georgia Review* 49/1 (Spring 1995): 321.

no one can conceive of the joy which filled our souls at the time we heard him pray for us unto the Father” (3 Nephi 17:16–17).

That critics such as Morrison have ignored the essential humility and poetry of revealed scripture is perhaps a reaction to the arrogant triumphalism of many believers, but it is also the shortcoming of contemporary criticism itself, which often thinks about the sacred with no more nuance than the most fundamentalist believer. Paul Ricoeur is a critic who is an exception to this rule, however. He points to a particularly important feature of sacred texts that implicitly, if not explicitly, acknowledges the text’s own partiality and its dependence on readers for the text to expand and magnify its meaning and to realize therefore its universality. Ricoeur points to the sacred text’s capacity to imagine its own poetic force and the consequent need for a semiotic approach, as opposed to a historical-critical method, so as to consider the paradox of the text’s simultaneous resistance to history yet dependence on a fleshly reading that is instantiated in a particular place and time. Revelation, for Ricoeur, is the moment of transfer from the seeming ahistorical space of a sacred meaning to our history. It might be akin to what Nephi means when he asks us to “liken” the scriptures to us (1 Nephi 19:23). This readerly “metaphorizing of narrative” displaces or relocates the text’s meaning in the reader’s capacity to imagine the figural nature of the text.¹¹ In other words, when we liken the scriptures to our circumstances, we allegorize them, we render them figural. This is not in defiance of their literal meaning or their historicity, or in denial of previous attributed meanings, but it is a way of layering a story’s or a passage’s meaning to extend across multiple circumstances. We might consider the way Nephi models this in his rereading of Isaiah as an example of new interpretations that make of the words of Isaiah a kind of Borgesian palimpsest, since we can simultaneously see the meaning of the words for Isaiah’s time, for Nephi’s time, and now for ours.¹²

11. Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 159.

12. See George Handley, “On the Moral Risks of Reading Scripture,” in *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah: 2 Nephi 26–27*, ed. Joseph M. Spencer and Jenny Webb (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016), 93–101.

We should worry that a purely reader response theory of revelation defeats the very purpose of revelation; it gives license to the reader to imagine whatever the reader desires God's will to be. The sacred text becomes a mirror, reflecting only what we already wanted to find, rather than a window through which we might catch glimpses of the mind of God. This, I think, is what is meant by "wresting" the scriptures "unto [our] own destruction" (see 2 Peter 3:16; D&C 10:63; Alma 13:20). But a faithful reading must engage in a seeming contradiction. It must admit the likelihood of self-deception and therefore abdicate the need for total identification with the scriptures, even as the reader attempts to liken them to the current circumstances. The apparent contradiction is that a faithful reading imagines a voice speaking to us *in* our circumstances and yet coming from *beyond* them. I would thus suggest that wresting the scriptures can happen when a reader forgets or ignores her own role in allegorizing sacred words for personal meaning, as if the personal meaning is generated automatically and accounts for the totality of meaning contained in sacred writ. *It is a failure to recognize the provisional and partial nature of the truths we harvest from reading.* As a result, the key to faithful reading is humility that is sufficient for the reader to receive the confirmations of the spirit and to acknowledge partiality.

Wresting the word of God, of course, is a real possibility every time we read because there is no way to categorically escape the human conditions that limit our understanding. To come back to 3 Nephi, in perhaps one of the most fascinating and chastening moments in the Book of Mormon, Christ explains to his New World audience that it is because of "stiffneckedness and unbelief [my disciples in the Old World] understood not my word" when he spoke of the other sheep (3 Nephi 15:18). He even goes so far as to suggest that it is "because of their iniquity that they know not of you" (15:19). One has to consider the hard doctrine here. Given what we know about how limited people's understanding was of the planet prior to 1492 and how common and easy it was for people to imagine that they alone were at the center of all that was known of the world, what kind of wild and creative imaginings would it have required for Christ's disciples to conceive that he might be going to other peoples on other unknown continents? Perhaps it is

the same kind of imagination Oliver Cowdery needed to study out in his mind a language he could not read. Even Columbus, the one man stubborn enough to erroneously imagine he could travel from Spain to Japan in a matter of six weeks and therefore was eligible for the task of connecting the continents, never understood the meaning of his own discovery. Yet Christ calls a staid and predictable understanding of the world, dictated by our moment in history and our geographical place and unable to imagine or ask about what we might not yet know, a form of iniquity. Revelation is his effort to pull us along, one step at a time, to get us beyond these limitations, yet he also understands that he can only reveal himself to us in the vocabulary of our current understanding. So it would seem that revelation, although bringing new understanding, also potentially comes with vestiges of misunderstanding that we must work assiduously to dust off of his eternal Word. His Old World disciples interpreted the other sheep as the gentiles, an interpretation indicating a major leap of understanding for them, a new and surprising awareness of the universality of Christ's atonement—and yet one that fell well short of a more truly global understanding of Christ's mission.

So wresting the scriptures is perhaps not always a separate act from likening them to ourselves. We might ask why it is not inevitable that all readers, good and bad, will be hindered by the inherent "weakness" of their "language," by the contingencies of their historicity as human beings in finite and particular bodies, times, and places. It would seem we are back in the same position of having to choose between an interpretation of the meaning of a sacred text as merely and completely determined by an agency beyond our historical condition or merely and completely determined by that condition. If there is no middle ground between these two extreme positions, it is not possible to insist on a difference between good and bad readings, something I have been suggesting crude reader response theory and crude historicist readings of the Book of Mormon alike are not capable of doing. Revelation may come even in the midst of our misunderstandings, which is perhaps one reason why Paul describes our mortal condition as looking through a glass darkly (see 1 Corinthians 13:12). We see, but we are also blinded. This result might not satisfy our yearnings for the clouds

of confusion and contention to finally clear, but it does at least make faith and imagination always necessary, which also importantly makes us more accountable for the knowledge we gain. Reading is a moral activity, interpretation involves moral risk, and this is because knowledge is not passively received but actively desired, imagined, hoped for, and finally grasped. The question then becomes: If an investment of so much of ourselves is required to gain a knowledge of God, how do we move our will closer to God's will and avoid the risk of self-projection and self-delusion?

Third Nephi as Menardian paradox

Borges suggested, as we have seen, that the moment of coincidence between the same words in the mind of a reader and the mind of an author reveals the inherent anachronism of all readings. And perhaps a Menardian paradox can be found right in 3 Nephi.¹³ Christ's Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew repeated there would seem to rather deliberately suggest this paradox, since the identical words are produced by Christ under different circumstances. One meaning of the repetition could be that his teachings and truth are entirely independent of context. (What else can be concluded from the fact that we find such precise repetition in two places in scripture?) Another, for the Book of Mormon critics, is that 3 Nephi is merely mimetic, derivative, and anachronistic. (Why does Christ use similar figural language from the Old World in a new context? If this is an authentic account of a historical visit to another continent, why does he speak of swine and dogs, bread and wine, when he might have invoked, say, agoutis and iguanas, or maize and chicha or pulque.) But I want to point to a third possibility, visible in the light of Borges's story.

13. I originally gave a shorter version of this paper in 2008 at a conference on 3 Nephi sponsored by the Maxwell Institute at Brigham Young University. Subsequently, I was surprised to discover in Grant Hardy's 2010 book, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, that he makes the same connection between Borges and the Sermon on the Mount as set forth in 3 Nephi. See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 194.

As I indicated at the outset of this essay, there are important and subtle discrepancies between the sermon in Matthew and the one in 3 Nephi; the coincidence between the two accounts is only momentary, and these differences often point to new and richer meanings. However, here I am more concerned with how the considerable overlap between the biblical and Book of Mormon accounts might offer new and richer understanding. As J. Hillis Miller has argued, when two accounts of the same event are rendered and differences—no matter how small—emerge, we become aware of a *third* text that lies above the two accounts. Miller insists that an ethics of reading begins with a recognition that every text responds to some “thing” that “demands it be respected by being put in words.”¹⁴ That “thing” can never be finally summed up in language because to try to do so is simply to repeat the problem by displacing that “thing” once more. Every text, then, “only gives itself. It hides its matter or thing as much as it reveals it. . . . It is unfaithful to the thing, by being what it is, just these words on the page.”¹⁵ Repetition, in other words, highlights the textuality of words and the “thing” that is yet to be summed up. Without denying its own revelatory power, this mechanism renders language poetic.

This is perhaps akin to the so-called law of witnesses: two or three witnesses together point simultaneously to their own partiality and to a reality beyond them precisely because their testimonies coincide *and* diverge. What I mean to suggest is that in offering hints of richer understanding of Christ’s words from Matthew or Luke, the sermon in 3 Nephi further discloses a gap between what is revealed and what God knows. Even though we do not have unlimited access to the latter, the textuality these discrepancies highlight models for us an understanding of revelation that lessens our tendency to wrest the scriptures to our own destruction. We might remember that, after teaching us of the iniquity of the Old World in failing to understand the meaning of *other sheep*, Christ teaches us of *yet other sheep* (see 3 Nephi 16:1).

14. J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 105.

15. Miller, *Ethics of Reading*, 121.

Perhaps we are thus guided toward a radical openness of what is yet to be revealed, since we can now see how partial the Book of Mormon itself is, despite its own marvelous restorations. Like the disciples in the Old World or like Oliver Cowdery, we are chastened to imagine worlds beyond our own.

Ricoeur insists that if there is a readerly need to metaphorize the narrative of a sacred text, *a good reading is a response to a semiotic pattern already established in the text whereby metaphors are narrativized*. He gives the example of the parable of the sower in which the “destiny of the sower is narrativized as the destiny of the word, the destiny of the word is narrativized as the destiny of the sowing.”¹⁶ We might consider Alma’s parable of the seed as a similar example, since it is clear that Alma’s allegory models how we ought to treat the very book we hold in our hands. The sacred text, in other words, inserts “into the meaning of what is said something about its being said and its reception.”¹⁷ If we were to consider Lehi’s journey into the wilderness, we would say that the story appears to have metaphorical shape, that it can be read as a metaphor for the mortal journey to the promised land of heaven. Certainly this is not an uncommon reading of the narrative, as we hear countless attempts in talks, lessons, and sermons to identify the Liahonas in our lives, the Lamans and Lemuels, the trials of broken bows, etc. What is striking in the narrative, however, is how often this metaphorizing is anticipated *in the narrative itself*. We see, for example, that Lehi’s stories and dreams are all told secondhand by his son, after receiving learning in the language of his father, but are also abridged by Mormon—and all of this, of course, made available in our language to our understanding by the translation of Joseph Smith. The book seems to insist rather emphatically on its textuality, as if reading, abridging, editing, and translating are integral to a seer’s vision and necessary for our understanding.

This textuality is especially apparent when we encounter a perfect coincidence of language in Matthew and 3 Nephi, a coincidence all the

16. Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 159.

17. Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 158.

more self-consciously textual when we consider that the coincidence appears in the English translations of apparently two different original languages—into a form of English, no less, that is antiquated for a contemporary reader. This is just one of many examples throughout the Book of Mormon of 3 Nephi's almost brazen confession of its own textuality. Despite this overt textuality, however, critics act as if this textuality were some embarrassing facet the book seeks to hide behind its claim to authenticity. Even believing readers are often embarrassed by or at least perplexed about these coincidences. I would suggest that the book's self-conscious textuality, what Ricoeur calls the "interpretive dynamism of the text itself" or its "interpretive function," is precisely the key to its interpretation and the key to escaping the false binaries into which so many of its readers fall.¹⁸

Ricoeur insists that "a theology that confronts the inevitability of the divine plan with the refractory nature of human actions and passions is a theology that engenders narrative."¹⁹ Surely a theology like Mormonism, which produces texts and narratives in excess of the Bible, is guilty as charged. It insists on this meeting ground between a divine plan and the unpredictable and potentially chaotic nature of multiple, individual interpretations. Consistent then with the fundamental meaning of a God in mortal flesh, Mormonism insists that the sacred is an encounter between the will of God and the will of human beings, the language of God and the language of human beings, heaven and earth, spirit and body. In so doing, our theology continually produces texts that, in their overt textuality, indicate their own nature as palimpsests and that therefore point to the need for the poetic imagination of readers and for the unending need for more texts to come. What, in other words, keeps narratives alive and dynamic, what keeps them from becoming flattened out by the exercises of tradition, is the vivification of new interpretations, which is another way of saying that what makes the gospel true is its relevance to human narratives, seized upon by one reader at a time and over time. To the degree that a text

18. Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 161, 181.

19. Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 182.

anticipates this unpredictability, it would seem to be a paradox, since there is an anticipation of surprise or a divine plan in unpredictability, but this is a paradox that foments the live nature of the text, that sustains its dynamism as part of a theology of continuing revelation. A theology of continuing revelation, in other words, is radically committed to the value of individual will and the importance of individual context. What is always yet to be, then, is not only future restoration of meaning but the next reader to join the adoption into Abraham's family. Reading and interpretation do not rest at some transcendent or ahistorical state but instead always point us back to the ground trod by each reader in time and space. This is a theology that is inherently hermeneutical, suggesting that its revelatory truths depend on the imagination to unlock and perpetuate their transcendence in the physical particularities of each human reader. As a hermeneutics in which the mortal context is always interpolated so as to be potentially sanctified, in which the earthly and secular are not separable but instead essential to the unveiling of divine pattern, we might call this an inherently Christian religion: "Christian" because it is Christ who offers himself as a translated being, the Word of God made flesh; and "religion" because, as the word implies, it requires and valorizes our perpetual rereadings of that Word.

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