



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

- Title** Adam and Eve in the Twenty-First Century: Navigating Conflicting Commandments in LDS Faith and Biblical Scholarship
- Author** Philip L. Barlow
- Reference** *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 8 (2016): 117–29.
- ISSN** 2151-7800 (print), 2168-3166 (online)
- Abstract** Failure to engage the arguments and insights of historical-literary criticism (“higher criticism”) runs risks analogous to avoiding any difficult issues of history. The former include a basic misunderstanding of sacred texts, a constricted ability to navigate the modern world, and an unnecessary vulnerability to later faith crisis. This essay argues that Latter-day Saint scholars should tap resources within their own tradition that prompt engagement with the best available scholarship, while avoiding slavish, uncritical subservience to all modern paradigms. Examples of distinctively Mormon resources include the following concepts: (1) Mormon’s editing of the Book of Mormon embodied the key conclusion of the “documentary hypothesis” before scholars fashioned that hypothesis in the second half of the nineteenth century. (2) Joseph Smith uniquely taught that God presented Adam and Eve with competing commandments, which they were left to navigate on their own; this implicitly enjoins disciples not to fear navigating other natural tensions such as faith and scholarship. (3) The book of Job presents God as condemning Job’s friends, who too zealously defend not God, but their own presumptions of God’s ways. Hence we should use such tools as higher criticism offers to learn more of the sources, context, and nature of received scriptural texts, which shape our own paradigms of God and reality.
- DOI** <https://doi.org/10.18809/sba.2016.0107>

# Adam and Eve in the Twenty-First Century: Navigating Conflicting Commandments in LDS Faith and Biblical Scholarship

*Philip L. Barlow*

IN THE 1980S SWISS ROMAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN HANS KÜNG was preoccupied with interreligious dialogue. He believed this crucial to an informed religious stance and to peace among nations. That he was the first Western theologian to be invited to Iran in the years following its 1979 Islamic revolution suggests his standing.

I encountered Küng's campaign at close range when in 1985 Harvard University hosted him and a prominent Muslim scholar for a public conversation. Unfortunately, I do not remember the name of the Muslim theologian; I was not versed in Islamic thought at the time. What I do recall is that both scholars laid out elaborate frameworks for even the possibility of Muslim-Christian theological exchange. The scholars' respective platforms for the rules of engagement seemed meticulous and wary, as if for a diplomatic summit between nations ill at ease. Both sides recognized that the religions held tenets considered problematic or offensive by the other. Yet candor and even a measure of vulnerability were essential if understanding, civility, and trust were to sprout in a dialogue worthy of the name.

Working its way through this procedural, political, and theological labyrinth, Küng's proposal for progress hinged on a provocative offer:

“We Christians will put forward the Trinity as a theological postulate for discussion and critique, if you Muslims will put on the table ‘higher criticism’ of the Qur’an.”<sup>1</sup> Küng subsequently elaborated:

In what sense can the Qur’an be viewed as the word of God? Is the holy book in fact literally dictated by God to the prophet Muhammad, [as] was also earlier unquestioningly assumed by Christians in regard to the “five books of Moses”? Is perhaps the Qur’an not also at once the word of God and the word of humanity: the word of God in human words? All of these are questions of the greatest practical and also political relevance. For how should the often much-too-comprehensive interweaving of faith and politics in Islam, as well as the gruesome medieval Islamic penal law, be corrected if everything in the Qur’an—[including] the chopping off of hands and feet—[is construed as] literally a command of God which may not be touched?<sup>2</sup>

The first principle of Islam insists on absolute monotheism, but despite the invitation to publicly critique the concept of the Trinity, his counterpart at Harvard was having none of Küng’s bold offering. While Muslims among themselves do contest proper interpretations of scripture by parsing so painstakingly as to rival any Jewish or Christian exegete, they do not question the perfection of the Qur’an itself. Muhammad’s divinely inspired statements (*hadiths*) convey meaning from Allah, they believe, but the wording is the Prophet’s. The Qur’an, by contrast, is understood to capture both Allah’s meaning *and* precise wording. Accordingly, the Muslim scholar in Cambridge found it intolerable to imagine the sacred book as a work subject to historical or literary development and analysis that suggests it is possessed of human elements, if even also of divine influence. Instead, the Arabic text, delivered with the assistance of the angel Gabriel, is a stenographically inerrant recording of Muhammad’s recitation of God’s words.

---

1. This is my paraphrase of Küng.

2. Hans Küng, “A Christian Scholar’s Dialogue with Muslims,” trans. Leonard Swindler, at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1920>; originally published in *The Christian Century* (October 9, 1986): 890–94.

Islam as a religion had disallowed the challenge of self-examination through the application of modern literary and historical tools to its central scripture; despite modest development, that remains largely true. Among Jews and Christians, however, these tools, applied to the Bible, had been developing among individual scholars since the sixteenth century and flourished more widely during the nineteenth century. By 1900 they were beginning to vest in the popular culture.

Indeed, in the half century after 1880, America's intellectual climate accommodated an inclusive, fundamental paradigm shift: *change* was coming to eclipse *stasis* as the background assumption of the nature of reality. *Truth* was coming to be conceived less as *unchanging evermore* in favor of a sense that *change* was itself among the most basic of truths. Geology had previously established that the earth had developed over millions of years, not merely thousands as many people construe the account in Genesis. Darwin was persuading intellectuals, who convinced wider swaths of the public, of the evolving nature of life forms. Historians sired historicism, teaching that historical development was the most elemental dimension of human existence. Representatives of the world's religions immigrated to America, breeding awareness of the evolution of diverse cultures over time and space, and raising questions of relativity among religions.

In this climate, the work of biblical scholarship increasingly focused on the fluidity of scripture in its formation and early transmission. Biblical books were seen to be the evolving products of many authorial and editorial hands across time, yielding diversity, and sometimes contradiction, beneath the erstwhile perceived unity of the Bible and even of single books. Isaiah was said to be authored by more than one writer in different centuries. The Torah was a redacted collage of earlier, independent, and partially parallel traditions. The sources and theology of Mark predated and were not the same as the other canonized gospels. Some of the epistles attributed to Paul were revealed as not in fact authored by him, but by others appropriating the prestige of Paul's name.

These discoveries and theories inevitably provoked questions of authority. To what extent was the Bible historical, true, enduring, and

inspired? Should scripture be viewed through the lens of cultural flow and critique? Or should culture be judged by scripture?

As with the advent of Darwinism and other areas of science, many biblical loyalists were able to adapt their faith to accommodate the new learning. Others were not. Jewish traditionalists accused the higher critics of anti-Semitism. In America, most every major Protestant denomination endured publicized and polarizing excommunication trials of scholars and ministers; some churches were driven to schism. In all, the advent of higher criticism, the rising prestige of science, a modern sense of history, and tensions over social policy provoked the most traumatic controversy to wrack Western Christendom since the Reformation. The result was a twentieth-century American church divided into evangelical/fundamentalist and liberal/modernist camps.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was not unaffected by these strains; the “new” scholarship seemed a potential threat to the historicity of biblical revelation and, indirectly, to the Book of Mormon. But with living prophets in their midst, and as a lay organization that had rejected the Reformation’s mantra of “sola scriptura,” and having been taught by Joseph Smith that the Bible was marred by errors of translation and transmission, Latter-day Saints were buffered from analyses that shed light on the human, practical aspects of the Bible. The Church’s formal response to higher criticism was correspondingly muted. The reactions of individual leaders to the higher critics ranged as diversely as those in other denominations, including some who selectively welcomed new insight. Yet the preponderant LDS sentiment ranged from disapproving to oblivious. Still, while affirming God’s hand in ancient and modern scriptures, the church declined to adopt an official stance on higher criticism. This had the happy effect of preventing a rupture such as those afflicting other churches in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

A side effect of this posture, alas, was that it left church members unprepared to deal with this sector of the modern world. With few

---

3. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion*, updated ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chapter 4.

exceptions, correlated church educational and devotional materials after the 1960s proceeded as if no such development as historical-literary criticism and advances in biblical archaeology had arisen. This not only limited members' understanding of the scriptures they studied; it also risked leaving some feeling unsupported, or even betrayed, when in later years they encountered intrinsic problems in the texts or modern approaches to the Bible. This has not yet pressed upon the Mormon consciousness to the same extent as the necessity of transparency in dealing with matters of history and social policy. In the era of the Internet and an increasing secularism, however, the issue lurks as a potential cloud on the LDS horizon.

A handful of LDS scholars who were equipped both in faith and in scholarly preparation to address the challenges and opportunities of higher criticism surfaced here and there in the twentieth century. Because the newly accessible scholarship reconstructed entrenched assumptions, the Mormon scholars met an uneven reception among their people, despite the support of such leaders as David O. McKay.<sup>4</sup> But today, for the first time, as the study of Mormonism and religion burgeons, a critical mass of young LDS scholars conversant with historical-critical methods has arisen. They are prepared to work through the issues in a context of faith. It will not be easier for them to win acceptance than it has been for historians of the past generation in a culture ambivalent about the task. Their task is nonetheless equally crucial. How to proceed?

### A proposal

My fundamental suggestion is that Mormons work from *within* the tradition, finding and thinking through resources in Mormonism that comport with modern literary/historical tools and to assign these tools a healthy sphere while remaining their masters rather than their slaves. Just as the church has learned that it must be better informed about its history in the interest of a sturdy and informed faith, the time may

---

4. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, chapter 4.

come when it must better understand its scriptures, beginning with the Bible. Modern historical-literary scholarly tools are not sufficient in themselves, but neither are they intrinsically enemies to faith. On the other hand, like all scholarship, modern methods of criticism themselves warrant ongoing critique.

For example, some critics steeped in modern assumptions may exceed necessary critical thought by too readily discounting the witness of earlier generations as self-evidently a product of wish fulfillment. Rather than suspending judgment, they may start with the post-Enlightenment assumption that miracles—say, the resurrection—cannot have happened, because such things do not happen. No one they respect has witnessed one. The fact that Gospel writers report stories of the resurrection—and that claimants surrendered their lives for belief in it—thus warrants no pause. Paul’s claim to have encountered the risen Jesus is dismissed despite the fact that he changed his fundamental beliefs because of it and gave his life for it. The Jesus Seminar famously goes so far as to imply that a majority vote system by its participants is a good way of determining what really happened and what Jesus historically did and did not say. Jesus’s parable of the good Samaritan appears only in the Gospel according to Luke (10:30b–35), but the Seminar votes it among the most likely to be authentically from Jesus, according to criteria it previously fashioned. The Seminar’s conclusions are not *ipso facto* wrong, but its procedure does risk fashioning a lens that in fact is a mirror. Albert Schweitzer and Jaroslav Pelikan are only two prominent examples of thinkers who have demonstrated the tendency of successive generations of Christians and scholars (Christian and otherwise) to make a sort of cultural Rorschach test out of the quest to interpret the historical Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Modern critical tools themselves require critical assessment.

What resources in our scriptures and collective experience might Latter-day Saints like me tap that would militate toward using historical-

---

5. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1910); and Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

literary scholarship thoughtfully, without becoming slavish? For present purposes, let me pose five examples.

*The Documentary Hypothesis demonstrated before it was invented*

The first LDS resource is to notice that the Book of Mormon explicitly depicts a key conclusion of subsequent historical-literary criticism. Nineteenth-century German scholar Julius Wellhausen (born in 1844, the year of Joseph Smith's death) led the way in unsettling many Jews and Christians by his formulation of the Documentary Hypothesis of the Pentateuch. This work upset the established belief that Moses, recording God's revelation, was the author of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Wellhausen and his followers purported to discern several pre-existing documents and authors, possessed of distinct vocabularies and theology, behind the composite book of Genesis and the other books of the Torah. As with the work of Copernicus, this theory disturbed people's orientation and questioned the architecture of their allegiance to the Bible.

Those Mormons who learned of and bothered to understand Wellhausen's hypothesis tended to be similarly nonplussed by this dissection of sacred texts. They needn't have been: Their own Book of Mormon, decades before Wellhausen's work, had offered the world not a series of deductions, not a scholarly theory about the redacted components making up the Torah, but an overt depiction of a process resembling what the Documentary Hypothesis imagined. The Mormon book portrayed the ancient prophet-editor-warrior Mormon as abridging and selecting from centuries of engraved metal plates to compile a coherent record that Joseph Smith subsequently "translated" into the Book of Mormon.<sup>6</sup>

*God is truth; therefore, fear not—even ambiguity*

A second point is that the Mormon God is a God of truth who requires humans to be honest in all their doings—and to pursue truth.<sup>7</sup> This

---

6. Richard Bushman first alerted me to this point in the 1980s.

7. On the God of truth, see Ether 3:12; John 14:6, 14–18; 17:17; 1 John 1:6; and elsewhere. Latter-day Saints who attend their sacred temples are interviewed periodically

mandate can seem in tension with the relentless call in Mormon practice for more faith. An example might be a conflict felt between the demands of higher criticism—to question, to dissect, to probe sacred texts for their sources, historical setting, and implied audiences—and the requirements of faith: to trust, to honor received revelation. Though Mormons may neglect this strand of their tradition, it is useful to recall that the tradition *embraces* tension in an unusual way.

The LDS understanding of Adam (“man; humankind”) and Eve (“life; mother of life”) in Edenic innocence is unique. This understanding did not emerge from scholarship. The story in the beginning chapters of Genesis teaches, according to Joseph Smith, that the incipient, archetypal human condition entailed a fundamental contradiction. The first, or representative, humans faced contradictory commandments from God. On the one hand, they were to multiply and replenish the earth; on the other, they were forbidden from partaking of the tree of knowledge, without which they would not be able to replenish. They were left on their own to navigate this contradiction, forced to reason without all the answers, to anticipate consequences, to choose. The existential human circumstance entails such divinely prompted tension as this.

There are many elements to this story we might contemplate. Among them is the implication that responding to tension, to real or apparent contradiction, is our human lot. To be human is to navigate ambiguity. Perhaps this is for our good.

Thinking Mormons encounter predictable tensions: between faith and scholarship, mind and spirit, head and heart, revelation and reason, intellectuals and church leaders, independence and loyalty. Such pairings harbor natural strains, like that between justice and mercy, both

---

by their ecclesiastical leader to verify their eligibility (“worthiness”) to attend. Among the mandated queries put to them is whether they are honest in all their dealings. If God were not the God of truth (and justice and mercy and love and goodness), such a god might necessarily be feared but would not prompt our adoration and hence would cease to be God (cf. Alma 42:22).

inside and outside of Mormonism. The ends, essence, and methods of the poles of each pairing are not identical. Yet though tension is not always comfortable, it need not mean irremediable conflict. We attempt to minimize friction when lubricating our car's engine but to employ friction when steering and braking. Tension between opposing forces is what holds effective systems in place, as with the centripetal and centrifugal forces at play in an atom, our solar system, and our galaxy. How, then, shall we make inevitable tension our ally? Is there a way to do this with faith and an informed approach to scripture? We ought to welcome resources that can help us navigate the various currents.

### *Job's friends' syndrome*

A third resource in the Mormon canon that might help us value modern scholarly tools is to remember the problem with Job's friends, a problem that can thrive among us believers. Job's friends, determined to defend God at all costs against Job's complaints, in fact offended God (Job 42:7–9). This was because what they actually defended was not God, but rather their errant and presumptuous *image* of God, which led them to condemn Job on false grounds. The story teaches that “zeal without knowledge,” an overly certain and unthoughtful or misinformed faith, can metastasize into idolatry.

Instead of undermining faith in God, the tools of biblical criticism can be used constructively as aides in detecting our idolatry, in thinking about the sources, content, and nature of our paradigms in which we place faith and by which we generate faith. This serves the quest for a well-grounded, pliable, and organic faith, rather than a brittle, vulnerable one. Jesus did not teach that disciples were to have faith for its own sake or to build faith uncritically in tradition or just in any notion or person. The greatest commandment, he said, was to love God with all one's heart, soul, and *mind* (Matthew 22:37). Pursuing things of virtue and good report in the spirit of the thirteenth article of faith, modern Saints might take note of the practice in some strands of Judaism in which the act of scholarship is a devotional exercise.

*The multivalence of restoration*

Fourth, the notion of restoration in the marvelous work and wonder that Joseph Smith facilitated is larger and richer than either Saints or their critics or observers are conscious of. Contemporary LDS leaders have urged that it is in fact an ongoing process. It is so large and organic, indeed, that we can err by our urge to link *every* aspect of Joseph Smith's labors with allegedly ancient practices and texts, which critical historical and biblical analysis renders problematic. This impulse is understandable because Joseph Smith often spoke or wrote in these terms and proclaimed ancient texts corrupted by scribal or translation problems, which he remedied by *restoring* them to proper form. But overdoing this notion can prompt a portion of our people to struggle when they encounter, sometimes through critics, aspects of Mormon scripture and practice that bear nineteenth-century, not ancient, characteristics.

It would help if we contemplated the multiple meanings of Joseph Smith's restoration beyond the recovery of corrupted scripture and historical truths and authority. An additional dimension of his restoration included repairing that which is fragmented (such as family breaches, addressed through genealogy, marriage sealings, and baptism for the dead). It also entailed completing that which is partial by fusing familiar elements with others both new yet everlasting. Restoration even included "those things which never have been revealed from the foundation of the world, but have been kept hid from the wise and prudent" (D&C 128:8, perhaps referring to the doctrine of deification and aspects of the temple). Joseph's work revising parts of the Bible in the years following the publication of the Book of Mormon—work he referred to as a "translation" but which did not proceed by scholarly means—included the recovery of strands of original texts, he said. But Joseph also harmonized contradictions, fixed grammar, offered implicit commentary, experimented with phrasings (while sometimes later amending or discarding his experiments), and added long and provocative sections without biblical parallel, such as the remarkable Enoch section of the Book of Moses. All this may have included the (inspired) impulse not simply to recover the biblical text as it once was, but more broadly, in

targumic fashion, to recast the Bible *as it ought to have been*, so as to comport with the revelations given him.<sup>8</sup>

Restoration in this sense can mean reenacting the prophetic role, in addition to retrieving the lost, repairing the broken, and completing the partial. Grasping the multivalence of restoration might spare people unnecessary dismay when they learn of disparity between modern and ancient religion. Careful thought about both text and history can help.

### *Taming a dangerous impulse*

Finally, we would do well to reexamine our perceived need to harmonize all aspects of scripture—remembering again that navigating tensions and choosing from among worthy contradictions is sometimes essential, as it was for Eve and Adam.

After the well-intentioned, second-century Christian convert Tatian put together his *Diatessaron*, this synthesis or harmony of the Four Gospels—the most prominent of its kind in early Christianity—became within a century the primary gospel text in Syria. Not until the fifth century did church authorities there deem it wise to return to the four separate Gospels handed down that were authoritative elsewhere in Christendom. Attempting to homogenize the four Gospel accounts into a single narrative was a natural impulse, and the effort has been replicated often over the centuries. But it prompted Tatian, sometimes arbitrarily, to choose one Gospel's account of an episode or a saying over others where they conflicted, to omit certain contradictory material in his sources, to conflate others, and to manufacture his own narrative sequence that differed from those of both John and the Synoptic Gospels. The result was not a secure improvement in viewing the Jesus of history. It was more analogous to a modern person attempting to harmonize, perhaps by computer, four photographs of four different artists' sculptures of the Madonna and presuming the resulting composite to be superior to any of them.

In this regard, I previously offered a suggestion to our colleagues who are fostering the emerging BYU New Testament Commentary. I

---

8. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, chapter 2, and Barlow, "To Mend a Fractured Reality: Joseph Smith's Project," *Journal of Mormon History* 38/3 (Summer 2012): 28–50.

suggested to them that perhaps we could use a critical commentary that adopts a format echoing the venerable *Interpreter's Bible* and its more recent iteration. "This commentary's format divides each page into three parts: the top consists of parallel columns of two translations of the Greek text; the middle is scholarly analysis and commentary explaining those texts; the bottom consists of devotional reflection and practical applications."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the Latter-day Saints could produce a commentary similarly sectioned: the top with its two translations of each pericope in the New Testament; the middle consisting of exegesis, commentary, and context *as determined by scholarly tools available to any trained scholar*; the bottom treating amendments and augmentations from the Joseph Smith Translation, connections to additional Latter-day Saint scripture and applications by church leaders, and perhaps devotional material in that or a fourth section.

Such a layout would (1) allow the historical biblical text its independent integrity, (2) embrace the best critical research, evidence, and thought interpreting and contextualizing it, and (3) without conflating the separable insights of modern revelation and that which is established through historical and literary tools, still respect the faith perspectives of Latter-day Saints as independent revelations, while putting them in conversation with the received historical New Testament and its informed interpreters.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

Coming to grips with the methods and insights of modern historical-literary criticism is challenging. It is disturbing, however, only in relation to our assumptions. As God is the God of truth, we ought to seek truth. The results need be no more upsetting than coming to terms with evidence that Joseph Smith did not translate the gold plates primarily

---

9. Philip L. Barlow, "The BYU New Testament Commentary: 'It Doth Not Yet Appear What It Shall Be'" (review essay of the series), *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 6 (2014): 83.

10. Barlow, "BYU New Testament Commentary," 67–86.

by looking at the tangible plates themselves as was formerly assumed. Or that today's hundreds of Native American tribes are not primarily descendants of Hebrews as Joseph and his generation believed. Or that, as the church's Gospel Topics online statement rightly notes, we do not know exactly what relationship the Book of Abraham bears to history and historical documents,<sup>11</sup> though church members have faith in the scripture's inspired source and nature.

Tensions between faith and scholarship, between spirit and intellect, are natural. It is relatively easy to cash out one or the other. But Latter-day Saints who are true to Joseph's Smith teachings ought not lose nerve. We are eternally both intelligences and spirits, or spirit-intelligences. In the interest of integrity, competence, and a durable faith, all that we are intellectually and all that we are spiritually must be called to arms as we navigate the dangerous, wondrous, obscure, and conflicted world that Adam and Eve bequeathed to us.

**Philip L. Barlow** is Leonard J. Arrington Professor of Mormon History and Culture at Utah State University.

---

11. "Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham," <https://www.lds.org/topics/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham>.