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Joseph Smith and the Bible

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Abstract

With regard to sacred books, Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism (1805 – 1844), is best known for his publication of the Book of Mormon, as a history comparable to the Bible, and for other texts he put forth as divine revelations. These volumes established the unique beliefs of Mormonism and set it apart from other religions. What is less well known and often overlooked by historians is the fact that virtually every aspect of Joseph Smith's career involved the Bible, which was central to his theology and to the religious system that he established – but always in ways unique to him. Priesthoods of Aaron and Melchizedek, the building of temples and the establishment of communities in promised lands are all themes for which he invoked biblical precedents. He also produced, but never published in his lifetime, a revision of the Bible itself, the result of three years of adding to and editing the text. In addition, as he taught doctrine in his correspondence, newspaper editorials and sermons, he drew his texts and illustrations from the Bible and virtually never from the Book of Mormon or his own revelations. This article explores the role of the Bible in each of these enterprises and examines the ways Joseph Smith used it in the establishment of Mormon beliefs. The article proposes that, in his extensive use of the Bible, he was making a statement regarding his prophetic authority and his relationship to prophets and scriptures of the past.

At one level, the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith's career can be divided into three periods, each characterised by a distinctive method through which he brought forth the religion of the Latter-day Saints.[1] The first period is that of his initial visions. The second is that of his revelations on church organisation, practice and doctrine. The third is that of revelation by public discourse and private conversation.

One factor of Joseph Smith's life that too often is overlooked by historians is the extent to which virtually all aspects of his career involved the Bible. Biographers Fawn M. Brodie and Donna Hill rarely mention the role of the

[1] The best biography of Joseph Smith is Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

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Bible in his life and other studies have similarly not dealt with it.[2] Some more recent works have paid more attention to the matter, but much remains to be examined.[3] This article will explore how almost every part of Joseph Smith's prophetic career was connected in some way with the Bible. He asserted that he was called by God to bring about the restoration of biblical religion – the religion not only of Jesus and the apostles but also of the Old Testament prophets. While that restoration was the focus of his career, the Bible itself was also part of the process by which it took place.

First Visions and the Book of Mormon

The first of the three periods (1820–30) starts with Joseph Smith's call and concludes with the publication of the Book of Mormon. His initial visions were, among other things, encounters with the Bible. As he told his story, his First Vision, in which he saw God and Jesus, resulted as he prayed in response to promises found in his reading of the New Testament.[4] His next such experience, the appearance of an angel who informed him about his call to translate and publish the Book of Mormon, contains significant biblical references. His primary account of this angelic visit lists five biblical prophecies that the angel quoted to him on that occasion,[5] but the published account of his assistant Oliver Cowdery identifies thirty, virtually all from the Old Testament.[6] According to both accounts, the angel quoted and commented on those Bible passages to teach young Joseph Smith about his life's mission to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus.

[2] See Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows my History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd edn, rev. and enl. (New York: Knopf, 1971); Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith, the First Mormon* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977).

[3] For Mormonism's use of the Bible in general, see Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Gordon Irving, 'The Mormons and the Bible in the 1830s', *BYU Studies* 13/4 (Summer 1973), pp. 473–88. Bushman does a better job than did previous biographers in noting the role of the Bible in Joseph Smith's work. See Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, pp. 130–43.

[4] See Joseph Smith, 'History, 1834–1836', pp. 120–1; and 'History, 1839', pp. 2–3, in Dean C. Jessee (ed.), *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, vol. 1, *Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1989), pp. 125–7, 271–2.

[5] See 'History of Joseph Smith', *Times and Seasons* 3/12 (15 April 1842), pp. 753–4. The passages were Malachi 3 ('part'); Malachi 4:1–6; Isaiah 11:1–16; Acts 3:22–3; Joel 2:28–32.

[6] See 'Letter IV. To W. W. Phelps, Esq.', *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1/5 (Feb. 1835), pp. 77–80; 'Letter VI. To W. W. Phelps, Esq.', 1/7 (April 1835), pp. 108–12; 'Letter VII. To W. W. Phelps, Esq.', 1/10 (July 1835), pp. 156–9.

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The Book of Mormon, published in March 1830, endorses the Bible strongly, although it laments what it sees as imperfections in its preservation through history.[7] The Book of Mormon abounds in references and allusions to the Bible and contains countless examples of biblical vocabulary and phraseology.[8] In its role as a second Bible in Mormonism, it makes frequent mention of the first and yet emphasises its own special role in the restoration of biblical religion. One of its stated purposes is to 'establish the truth' of the Bible.[9] In multiple passages, it deals with recognisable biblical concepts, such as the house of Israel, the law of Moses, prophets and scripture and the nature and role of the Bible itself. But more than anything else it teaches fundamental Christianity – salvation from the fall, sin and death through Jesus Christ; faith; repentance; baptism; the Holy Spirit; and spiritual rebirth. All of these are biblical topics in which the Book of Mormon takes for granted the existence and availability of the Bible and the information it contains. Indeed, the book's doctrinal function is not necessarily to break new theological ground but to provide fuller, clearer and better explanations than are found in the Bible. But in doing so – perhaps paradoxically – it attempts to substantiate both the Bible's authority and its basic teachings. It was this combination of familiarity and clarity that attracted its first converts.[10] The Book of Mormon's intimate connection with the Bible and the attention it pays to Bible-based theological issues found among contemporary Christians led Alexander Campbell to remark caustically in 1831 that it conveniently dealt with, and provided answers for, all the important religious controversies of his time.[11]

The authority of the Bible and the Book of Mormon have never been in question in Mormonism. The two books preceded the formal organisation of the church, and both are mentioned and endorsed in the canonical document which accompanied that organisation.[12] It is perhaps for this reason that, unlike Mormonism's other sacred books, neither the Bible nor the Book of Mormon has ever been canonised formally by the church. Nonetheless, the Bible's authority in Mormonism seems to stem not from the fact that it exists

[7] See, for example, Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 13:20–8.

[8] On this last point, see Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, pp. 26–32. Barlow seems to hint, correctly in my view, that explanations proposed so far have come short of accounting for the quantity and application of biblical language in the Book of Mormon. Ibid., pp. 31–2.

[9] Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 13:40.

[10] See Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 185–9.

[11] See Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger* 2/2 (7 Feb. 1831), p. 93.

[12] See Doctrine and Covenants 20:8–12.

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but from the fact that Joseph Smith's revelations and the Book of Mormon endorse it.

Given all this, it is most remarkable that, throughout his life, Joseph Smith seldom quoted or taught from the Book of Mormon nor demonstrated any particular familiarity with its content. As we shall see, his emphasis was on the Bible instead.

Revelations

As the Mormon prophet's restoration continued in the years following the publication of the Book of Mormon, the Bible remained central to virtually everything he did, and subsequent revelations and scriptural texts were to a great degree built on a biblical foundation. But, whereas the Book of Mormon presents basic Christian beliefs much as they are perceived among Christians generally, with most of Joseph Smith's later doctrinal innovations the distance between Mormonism and traditional Christianity increased, eventually resulting in a faith with core beliefs and practices so unique that some have come to see it as outside Christianity altogether.[13]

The second stage of Joseph Smith's revelatory career (1830–8) starts with the organisation of the Latter-day Saint church in April 1830. It is characterised by the reception of over one hundred recorded verbal communications from God that set forth the beliefs, organisation and functions of the newly founded church. Those revelations, presented in the words of God in the fashion of Old Testament prophecy, are collected in a third Latter-day Saint book of scripture, the Doctrine and Covenants, first published and canonised in 1835 and then expanded with the reception of later revelations. Most of the revelations, in one way or another, expound on themes already present in the Old and New Testaments, such as God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, faith, repentance, baptism, justice, mercy, the fall, resurrection, the last judgement, spiritual gifts, the last days and the second coming of Jesus. All of these are biblical concepts and none of them are introduced in the revelations as though they were new ideas. Like the Book of Mormon, the revelations take for granted the existence and availability of the Bible. But, unlike the Book of Mormon, the revelations often expand on,

[13] Historian Jan Shipps calls the Latter-day Saint faith 'a new religious tradition'. See Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985). In some circles, Mormonism is viewed as altogether non-Christian, but not always for the same reasons. See Kent P. Jackson, 'Are Mormons Christians? Presbyterians, Mormons, and the Question of Religious Definitions', *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 4/1 (Oct. 2000), pp. 52–65.

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elaborate or build on biblical themes to the point that they are no longer clearly recognisable to non-Latter-day Saint readers.

We learn, for example, that Satan had been 'an angel of God who was in authority in the presence of God, who rebelled against the Only Begotten Son whom the Father loved and who was in the bosom of the Father, [and] was thrust down from the presence of God and the Son'.[14] Another example is an explanation of John 5:28–9: 'The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation'.[15] As Joseph Smith and his scribe meditated on the meaning of those words they reported: 'The Lord touched the eyes of our understandings and they were opened, and the glory of the Lord shone round about. And we beheld the glory of the Son, on the right hand of the Father, and received of his fulness.'[16] In the ensuing vision, they learned that the biblical heaven consists of three 'degrees of glory', rewarded on the basis of earthly deeds of faith and righteousness. The highest, the 'Celestial kingdom', will be the inheritance of those who 'received the testimony of Jesus, and believed on his name and were baptized after the manner of his burial', who 'receive the Holy Spirit by the laying on of the hands of him who is ordained and sealed unto this power; and who overcome by faith, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, which the Father sheds forth upon all those who are just and true'.[17] The language is very biblical, but the aggregate message of passages like these is uniquely Latter-day Saint.

The revelations often encounter the Bible in very direct ways. One revelation presents a new account of the Olivet Discourse (Jesus' end-time prophecy in Matthew 24), another an explanation of Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares. One is a question-and-answer session concerning the book of Revelation and another is a question-and-answer session concerning Isaiah. Revelations deal with Daniel's visions, the mission of John the apostle, and the lives of Adam, Moses and Aaron. To these lists can be added many examples in which the revelations draw liberally from biblical phrases and biblical images.[18]

Again, Latter-day Saints see in these communications a fuller and clearer exposition of biblical beliefs than can be found in the Bible itself. Joseph Smith

[14] Doctrine and Covenants 76:25.

[15] All Bible passages quoted are as in Joseph Smith's personal copy, a King James Version printed in 1828 by H. and E. Phinney, Cooperstown, New York.

[16] Doctrine and Covenants 76:19–20.

[17] Doctrine and Covenants 76:51–3.

[18] One recent study identified about ninety biblical phrases in a March 1831 revelation (Doctrine and Covenants 45); Foster V. Hall, personal communication.

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taught the doctrine derived from them yet, as with the Book of Mormon, he rarely used the revelations as texts in his sermons and writings.

Translations

During the years 1830–3, Joseph Smith was regularly engaged in preparing what he called a New Translation of the Bible. With the help of scribes to whom he dictated the text, he worked his way through the Old and New Testaments of the King James translation, examining all of it and making changes in the wording of about 3,400 verses. He also added hundreds of lines of new material for which there is no biblical counterpart.[19] 'God may correct the scripture by me if he choose', he said.[20]

Joseph Smith's Bible translation quickly diverges from the traditional text and traditional interpretations. One early passage gives Eve's thoughts on why the fall was a good thing: 'Were it not for our transgression we should never [have] had seed, & should never [have] known good & evil & the Joy of our redemption & the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient.'[21] The largest single addition is an account of Enoch, inserted into the narrative at Genesis 5. The few verses in Genesis that discuss Enoch are expanded by over one hundred additional verses which depict his labours to create an ideal society called Zion, his covenants with God relative to his descendants, his visions of the future, his teachings regarding the coming of Jesus and the removal of his sanctified city from the earth. In these and other passages, Joseph Smith's Bible revision shows the patriarchs and matriarchs of Genesis as Christians who knew of Jesus, obeyed his gospel and looked forward to his coming. This view of pre-Christian Christianity, already seen in the Book of Mormon, was central to Joseph Smith's theology. Later he would write that 'all that were ever saved, were saved through the power of this great plan of redemption, as much so before the coming of Christ as since; if not, God has had different plans in operation (if we may so express it) to bring men back to dwell with himself; and this we cannot believe.'[22]

[19] See Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson and Robert J. Matthews (eds), *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004). Latter-day Saints today generally refer to it as the Joseph Smith Translation.

[20] 13 April 1843, recorded by Willard Richards, in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (eds), *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), p. 191.

[21] Old Testament Manuscript 2, p. 10; Faulring, Jackson and Matthews, *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible*, p. 603.

[22] 'The Elders of the Church in Kirtland, to their Brethren Abroad', *The Evening and the Morning Star* 2/18 (March 1834), p. 143.

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Only some key chapters of the New Translation were published in Joseph Smith's lifetime, and the whole work was not put in print until over two decades after his death.[23] The reason was strictly economic; he never was able to raise the funds necessary for the publication of such a large book, and its printing was often second in priority to other projects.[24] He called this work a translation, although it did not involve any ancient text other than his English Bible. Among the topics in which the New Translation makes its most important contributions to Latter-day Saint beliefs are the nature of God, the cosmic scope of his work, the mission of Jesus, the origin of Satan, the fall, the law of Moses and the antiquity of Jesus' gospel. Although these may appear to be biblical concepts, in the New Translation they are developed in ways that set Mormonism apart as a unique branch of Christianity.

Another Bible-related text was brought to light after the completion of the New Translation. Joseph Smith announced the Book of Abraham as a translation of 'some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands, from the Catacombs of Egypt'.[25] The translation was made in the summer and fall of 1835, but it was not published until 1842, when it appeared in three instalments in the church's newspaper.[26] The record corresponds with Genesis 11:27–12:20, but it is about ten times as long and it contains much history and theology not included in the Bible, such as an Abrahamic creation narrative and an account of a meeting in heaven in which God discussed with the spirits (including Jesus, Abraham and Satan before his fall) the forthcoming creation of the world in which they would live:

> And there stood one among them [Jesus] that was like unto God, and he said unto those who were with him: We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell; and we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them; and they who keep their first estate shall be added upon; and they who keep not their first estate shall not have glory in the same kingdom with

[23] *The Holy Scriptures, Translated and Corrected by the Spirit of Revelation. By Joseph Smith, Jr., the Seer* (Plano, IL: The [Reorganized] Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1867). This publication is substantially edited from the original MSS. The most recent edn is dated 1991.

[24] The evidence is collected in Robert J. Matthews, 'Joseph Smith's Efforts to Publish His Bible Translation', *Ensign* (Jan. 1983), pp. 57–64.

[25] 'A Translation', *Times and Seasons* 3/9 (1 March 1842), p. 704.

[26] See *Times and Seasons* 3/9 (1 March 1842), pp. 703–6; 3/10 (15 March 1842), pp. 719–22; 3/14 (16 May 1842), p. 783.

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> those who keep their first estate; and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever.[27]

Along with two excerpts from the New Translation of the Bible and some other narrations by Joseph Smith, the Book of Abraham was later included in a volume called the Pearl of Great Price, the fourth Latter-day Saint scripture, canonised in 1880.

Bible discourses

The third stage of Joseph Smith's revelatory career (the Nauvoo, Illinois, period, 1839–44) is characterised by a sharp decrease in revelations received in the voice of God.[28] But it is also characterised by the flowering of Joseph Smith's career as a teacher and public speaker. The shift is important, because in this period his conversations and public discourses, in his own words, became the vehicle for the continuing revelation of Latter-day Saint doctrine.

Joseph Smith had taught openly since the beginning, but prior to the Nauvoo period, his public discourses played a much smaller role than did some other aspects of his calling, such as translating and publishing sacred books, organising and administering the church, and establishing communities. He had delegated much of the public speaking to a spokesman, the gifted and experienced orator Sidney Rigdon.[29] But, beginning in the spring of 1839, he redefined his mission and adopted a new urgency to voice personally the things he believed God had revealed to him. During the years that followed, public preaching and teaching were clearly among his highest priorities.

Over 170 separate discourses of Joseph Smith are recorded in the Nauvoo period, some before small groups and some before thousands.[30] They were recorded both by official scribes and by other interested listeners in the audience, often incompletely but sometimes with considerable fullness and precision. Although the sermons covered a variety of topics, more than anything else, Joseph Smith used them to teach his theology. 'Tis my duty to teach the doctrine', he stated.[31] Characteristically, his primary method for doing that was to quote, paraphrase and reason out of the Bible. Apart from

[27] Pearl of Great Price, Abraham 3:24–6.

[28] After the winter of 1838–9, only Doctrine and Covenants 124–6 contain revelations in God's words. Sections 127 and 128 come from letters written by Joseph Smith, and sections 129–31 are excerpts from his teachings to groups of followers. Section 132 was revealed in the 1830s but was not recorded until 1843.

[29] See Doctrine and Covenants 35:23; 100:9–11.

[30] See Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, throughout.

[31] 8 April 1844, recorded by William Clayton; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 363.

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his speeches that dealt exclusively with political matters, the vast majority of his addresses included material from the Bible and were built on biblical themes. Altogether, he touched on hundreds of Bible verses.

Joseph Smith cared deeply about the Book of Mormon and its role in his church, publishing three editions of it during his lifetime. His care for the revelations was just as deep.[32] 'Take away the Book of Mormon, and the revelations, and where is our religion? We have none', he said.[33] But again, he virtually never incorporated passages from the Book of Mormon or the revelations into his sermons and writings, and they always remained strangely *external* to him, as though they were never really part of him. But such was not the case with the Bible, the language of which flowed out of him freely, naturally and often unconsciously. He used biblical phrases, examples and images in correspondence, newspaper editorials, private conversations and especially in public sermons.[34]

Joseph Smith's use of the Bible was not a public communications effort to gain credibility with non-Mormons. With rare exceptions, his sermons and writings were aimed only at Latter-day Saints. Whereas others were sent out on preaching missions and interacted with non-believers, his last half-decade was spent primarily at home in his own communities. It was to his followers

[32] Joseph Smith mentioned 'the great benefits to the world which result from the Book of Mormon and the revelations, which the Lord has seen fit in His infinite wisdom to grant unto us for our salvation, and for the salvation of all that will believe'. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd edn rev. (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1957), vol. 1, p. 235.

[33] High council minutes, 21 April 1834, Oliver Cowdery, clerk; in Fred C. Collier and William S. Harwell (eds), *Kirtland Council Minute Book* (Salt Lake City, UT: Collier, 1996), p. 37.

[34] See the list in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, pp. 421–5, and the Old Testament list in Grant Underwood, 'Joseph Smith's Use of the Old Testament', in *The Old Testament and the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: Randall, 1986), pp. 399–411. In Ehat and Cook's scripture index, most of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants references are not in Joseph Smith's discourses but in the editors' notes. A published collection of his commentary on the Bible shows that Joseph Smith most frequently discussed passages from the following books, listed in order of his greatest use (total page numbers in parentheses): Matthew (41), Genesis (26), John (14), Revelation (14), 1 Corinthians (13), Hebrews (12), Isaiah (11), Acts (11), Luke (10) and Malachi (8). See Joseph Smith, *Joseph Smith's Commentary on the Bible*, comp. and ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1994). Some of the commentary comes from his letters and journal entries, but much more comes from his Nauvoo discourses. The individual passage he discussed most extensively was Malachi 4:5–6. Underwood's study, which includes not only commentary but all allusions to, and borrowed or quoted vocabulary from, the Old Testament, lists Isaiah, Psalms and Genesis as the most-cited Old Testament books.

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that his Bible-based teachings were addressed, and he delivered them in unique and interesting ways. In the records of his discourses from the last five years of his life, there is only one time where it appears that he used written notes for a sermon.[35] And in all the extant accounts of those discourses, there is little to suggest that he ever took a Bible with him to the stand. He is recorded as having said that, when he spoke publicly, 'he had to depend entirely upon the living God for every thing he said'.[36] His audiences believed that they were witnessing something remarkable. One first-time listener wrote, 'We soon felt & knew we were listening to one that had not been taught of men – So different were all his thoughts & language'.[37] Another recorded, 'I have listened to his clear and masterly explanations of deep and difficult questions. To him all things seemed simple and easy to be understood, and thus he could make them plain to others as no other man could.'[38] Brigham Young later recalled, 'When I first heard him preach, he brought heaven and earth together . . . . He took heaven, figuratively speaking, and brought it down to earth; and he took the earth, brought it up, and opened up, in plainness and simplicity, the things of God . . . . Would he not take the Scriptures and make them so plain and simple that everybody could understand?'[39]

Joseph Smith's Bible-based sermons became the primary revelatory events and the major means by which he brought new beliefs into the church. Thus when he discussed Bible passages in his Nauvoo discourses, he was not simply using scripture to reinforce the words of biblical writers or to illustrate his own ideas. Instead, he was making known new ideas for the first time. In other words, he was not teaching out of the Bible, he was using Bible passages as the starting point to reveal new beliefs, often going far beyond what was printed on his Bible's pages. Consider the following excerpts from his sermons that stem from passages in the Bible:

Genesis 1:1: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth'.

> Learned Doctors[40] tell us God created the heavens & earth out of nothing. They account it blasphemy to contradict the idea – They will call you a

[35] See Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, pp. 38–44, 50–1, n. 1.

[36] 13 Aug. 1843, recorded by Willard Richards; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 238.

[37] 12 Nov. 1843, recorded by William Rowley; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 258.

[38] Cited in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. xx.

[39] 7 Oct. 1857; *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1855– 86), vol. 5, p. 332.

[40] 'When I say Doctor & Lawyer I mean the D & L of the scriptures'. 7 April 1844, recorded by William Clayton; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 358.

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> fool – You ask them why[;] they say don't the Bible say he created the world & and they infer that it must be out of nothing. The word create came from the word Barau – don't mean so – it means to organize – same as [a] man would use to build a ship – hence we infer that God had materials to organize from – chaos – chaotic matter. – element had an existence from the time he [God] had. The pure pure principles of element are principles that never can be destroyed – they may be organized and reorganized = = but not destroyed.[41]

The Hebrew word *bārā'* is as linguistically and theologically ambiguous as its English counterpart, *create*. Yet Joseph Smith saw in it a clear refutation of the traditional Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Creation is organisation, and God had materials to work from prior to his making of 'the heaven and the earth'. Thus in Joseph Smith's theology, God is the great organiser who imposed function and order on chaotic matter that had existed as eternally as God had. Matter itself is unmade and indestructible, but it can be 'organized and reorganized' under God's power.

> *Genesis* 1:26–27: 'And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion . . . . So God created man in his own image; in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them'.

> That which is without body or parts is nothing. There is no other God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones . . . . Spirits are eternal. At the first organization in heaven we were all present and saw the Savior chosen and appointed, and the plan of salvation made and we sanctioned it. We came to this earth that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the Celestial Kingdom.[42]

> God that sits enthroned is a man like one of yourselves. That is the great secret. If the veil was rent to day & the great God who holds this world in its sphere or its orbit – [and] the planets – if you were to see him to day you would see him in all the person image, [and] very form of man. For Adam was created in the very fashion of God.[43]

[41] 7 April 1844, recorded by William Clayton; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 359. Transcriptions of Joseph Smith's discussion of Bible passages with capitalisation, punctuation and spelling standardised can be found in Smith, *Joseph Smith's Commentary on the Bible*.

[42] 5 Jan. 1841, recorded by William Clayton; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 60.

[43] 7 April 1844, recorded by William Clayton; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 357.

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In these passages, Joseph Smith went well beyond the biblical text to analyse both the nature of God and the nature of man. Adam's creation in God's image is literal, and hence God is not only in the same form as humans but also possesses a tangible body of flesh and bones. Human bodies house pre-existing spirit individuals who lived in the presence of God and embraced in advance the saving work of Jesus.

> *Daniel* 7:9–14: 'I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit . . . . Thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him . . . . One like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days . . . . And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion'.
>
> Dan VII Speaks of the Ancient of days, he means the oldest man, our Father Adam, Michael; he will call his children together, & hold a council with them to prepare them for the coming of the Son of Man. He, (Adam) is the father of the human family & presides over the Spirits of all men, & all that have had the Keys must stand before him in this great Council . . . . The Son of Man stands before him & there is given him glory and dominion. – Adam delivers up his Stewardship to Christ, that which was delivered to him as holding the keys of the Universe, but retains his standing as head of the human family . . . .
>
> Those men to whom these Keys have been given will have to be there. And they without us cannot be made perfect [Hebrews 11:40]. These men are in heaven, but their children are on Earth. Their bowels yearn over us . . . . All these authoritative characters will come down & join hand in hand in bringing about this work . . . . We cannot be made perfect without them, nor they without us[;] when these things are done the Son of man will descend, the ancient of Days sit. – We may come to an innumerable company of Angels [Hebrews 12:22] have communion with & receive instruction from them.[44]

Joseph Smith here identifies the primary characters in Daniel 7: the 'Ancient of days' as Adam and the 'Son of man' as Jesus Christ. At the end of time, Adam, who presides over the human family, will gather his children together, particularly those who hold the 'keys' that govern the priesthood. After the multitude is assembled, Jesus will appear and Adam will return the keys

[44] Summer 1839, recorded by John Taylor; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, pp. 8–9, 10.

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of his stewardship to his Lord. Those key-holders who have already lived and died will be there. Connecting Hebrews 11:40 and 12:22–3 with the Daniel prophecy, Joseph Smith envisioned people who are already in heaven being involved still in God's work on earth, with the mutual labour of God's servants in both realms necessary for the salvation of all.

> *Matthew* 10:1–2: 'And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power . . . . Now the names of the twelve apostles are these: the first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother'.
>
> How have we come at the priesthood in the last days? It came down, down in regular succession. Peter James & John had it given to them & they gave it up [to us].[45]

Mormonism's claim to authority from God is based on a belief that the ancient apostles, Peter, James and John, gave to Joseph Smith the apostleship and the keys of the kingdom and that the same authority has been passed on to his successors. Thus 'regular succession', to cite Joseph Smith, does not mean succession from the apostles through the centuries (as in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions) but rather the conferral of authority under the hands of men who formerly lived on earth and who returned as angelic messengers to restore that authority in 'the last days'.

> *Luke* 20:27–38 (29–33): 'There were therefore seven brethren: and the first took a wife, and died without children. And the second took her to wife, and he died childless. And the third took her; and in like manner the seven also: and they left no children, and died. Last of all the woman died also. Therefore in the resurrection whose wife of them is she? for seven had her to wife'.
>
> All contracts in view of this Life only terminate with this Life. [Such is the] Case of the woman & 7 husbands . . . . Those who keep no eternal Law in this life or make no eternal contract are single & alone in the eternal world.[46]

Jesus' answer in the story in Luke 20 was that in the life after death, people 'neither marry, nor are given in marriage' (Luke 20:35). Joseph Smith takes the episode in a rather unexpected direction, seeing Jesus' answer as evidence for Latter-day Saint teaching regarding the eternal duration of marriage,

[45] Before 8 Aug. 1839, recorded by John Taylor; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 9.
[46] 16 July 1843, recorded by Franklin D. Richards; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 232.

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if performed on earth under the powers revealed to Joseph Smith by the resurrected Bible prophet Elijah in 1836.[47]

> *1 Corinthians* 15:50: 'Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption'.
>
> Flesh and Blood cannot inherit the kingdom of god or the kingdom that god inherits or inhabits. But the flesh without the blood, and the Spirit of god flowing in the vains in Sted of the blood[;] for blood is the part of the body that causes corruption. therefore we must be changed in the twinkle of an Eye or have to lay down these tabernacles and leave [let] the blood vanish away[.] Therefore Jesus Christ left his blood to atone for the Sins of the world that he might assend into the presents of the father . . . . For the Blood is the corruptible part of the tabernacles.
>
> for the resurrection is devised to take away corruption and make Man perfect or in the glory which he was created for.[48]

The commentary goes much further than Paul's words to explain why flesh and blood cannot inherit God's kingdom. Blood, a temporary agent of mortality, will be replaced by God's spirit in the veins of resurrected bodies. Joseph Smith emphasised the resurrection as the literal reunion of the preexistent human spirit and the earthly – although now glorified – body of flesh and bones, patterned after the image of God.

> *Acts* 7:58, *etc.*: '. . . a young [man], . . . whose name was Saul'.
>
> Paul is about 5 foot high; very dark hair; dark complection; dark skin; large Roman nose; sharp face; small black eyes, penetrating as eternity; round shoulders; and a whining voice, except when elevated and then it almost resembles the roaring of a Lion. He was a good orator.[49]

Needless to say, these interpretations are not what most Christians see when they read the Bible. But that is precisely the point. Joseph Smith's Bible-based sermons were not merely about the Bible. He said, 'It is my meditation all the day & more than my meat & drink to know how I shall make the saints of God to comprehend the visions that roll like an overflowing surge,

[47] According to Latter-day Saint belief, Elijah appeared to Joseph Smith on 3 April 1836 and dispensed to him the 'sealing power' by which actions bound on earth are bound also in heaven; see Doctrine and Covenants 110:13–16.

[48] 12 May 1844, recorded by George Laub; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, pp. 370–1.

[49] 5 Jan. 1841, recorded by William Clayton; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 59.

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before my mind.'[50] For him the Bible was not the end but a springboard to knowledge reserved in the heavens to come forth in the last days through him. Even so, he did not see himself as reading anything *into* the Bible but simply drawing through revelation the true meaning *out of* the Bible. And he presented his interpretations not as departures from the text but as though they should have been obvious to any reader. 'We teach nothing but what the Bible teaches', he said. 'We believe nothing, but what is to be found in this book'. 'In it the "Mormon" faith is to be found.'[51]

Joseph Smith's biblical restoration

Almost all of Mormonism's early converts were Christians who believed in the Bible. Thus from the beginning, the Bible – and not the Book of Mormon or the revelations – was the Latter-day Saints' common corpus of scriptural information. That situation did not change much for decades. In Joseph Smith's day, Latter-day Saints used the Doctrine and Covenants mainly as a source for ecclesiology, and the Book of Mormon was used primarily as evidence that the heavens had again been opened and that God was preparing the world for the second coming of Jesus.[52] The Bible's chapter and verse divisions made access easy and provided a common referencing system. It was not until late in the century that the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants received chapter and verse divisions that made them fully serviceable.[53] Joseph Smith himself clearly was not as well-versed in the Book of Mormon as he was in the Bible. Aside from his reading of it in preparation for its second printing in 1837, there is scant evidence that he ever read the Book of Mormon after he published it.

But it was not only for reasons of familiarity and accessibility that the Mormon prophet taught and preached out of the Bible. I believe that there was something more involved, something fundamental about who Joseph Smith was and what role he played in the religion he founded.

If nothing else, Joseph Smith must be considered audacious. When he was 23 years old, he produced the manuscript of a book that he claimed was a companion scripture to the Bible. Yet the Book of Mormon itself asserts that, although it is equal in authority to the Bible, unlike the Bible it was preserved in purity since antiquity, written with the explicit needs of future

[50] 16 April 1843, recorded by Willard Richards; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 196.

[51] Mathew S. Davis to Mary Davis, 6 Feb. 1840, in Smith, *History of the Church*, vol. 4, p. 78.

[52] See Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, pp. 63–5, 196.

[53] See also Grant Underwood, 'Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology', *Dialogue* 17/4 (Autumn 1984), pp. 56–60; and Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, pp. 240–6.

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readers in mind, filled with explanations of fundamental Christian tenets more clearly expressed than in the Bible, and was intended by God to be a tangible witness to the calling of a modern prophet. Those are bold claims for a first-time author.

The following year, aged 24, Joseph Smith began making wholesale revisions in the Bible, or 'correcting' it, to use his own term. In Christian, Bible-loving, mostly Protestant America of the 1830s, it was indeed audacious for anyone – but especially for someone so young and with no formal academic or ministerial training – to edit and correct the recorded words of Moses, Isaiah, Matthew and Paul. Yet Joseph Smith saw no contradiction in this, believing that it was truth itself that was sacred, not words, and believing also that, as God's prophet, he had both sufficient inspiration and sufficient authority to correct the Bible wherever he felt it necessary.

Joseph Smith's complex use of the Bible demonstrates that, in his vision of reality, his own inspiration trumped what was printed on the Bible's pages. Whether deliberately or not, he was making a statement regarding his prophetic authority and his relationship to prophets and scriptures of the past. His New Translation showed that the Bible was subordinate to what God revealed to him, and his use of the Bible in sermons showed that his revelations made him the Bible's master, not its servant. He and his followers believed that the standard by which to measure religious truth is not the Bible but the revelations that came through Joseph Smith. It is in this that we best see him and his followers as readers of the Bible. But even beyond matters pertaining to scripture, revelation and doctrine, virtually everything he did as founder and leader of the Latter-day Saint faith was grounded in the Bible. Consider such things as the priesthoods of Aaron and Melchizedek, sacred rites, apostleship and the keys of the kingdom, church organisation, the establishment of Zion communities and promised lands, laying out city plans with temples in the main squares, the gathering of peoples and even polygamy. All had their roots in the Bible and in the Mormon prophet's understanding of it.

Joseph Smith saw the work that he started as the culmination of the Bible and the fulfilment of all it contains. He spoke of the 'last days' as 'the dispensation of the fulness of times, when . . . all things shall be restored, as spoken of by all the holy prophets since the world began: for in it will take place the glorious fulfillment of the promises made to the fathers'.[54] He believed that his work was

> a cause that has interested the people of God in every age; it is a theme upon which prophets, priests, and kings have dwelt with peculiar delight;

[54] 'To the Saints Scattered Abroad', *Times and Seasons* 1/12 (Oct. 1840), p. 178.

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> they have looked forward with joyful anticipation to the day in which we lived; and fired with heavenly and joyful anticipations they have sung, and [written], and prophesied of this our day; – but they died without the sight; we are the favored people that God has made choice of to bring about the Latter Day glory; it is left for us to see, participate in, and help to roll forward the Latter Day glory; 'the dispensation of the fulness of times, when God will gather together all things that are in heaven, and all things that are upon the earth, even in one' . . . . And all things whether in heaven or on earth will be in one, even in Christ.[55]

Thus, in the end Joseph Smith saw his restoration as being in large measure *about* the Bible – about restoring biblical religion to the world, correcting the biblical text, revealing additional scriptures as witnesses and companions to the Bible, restoring biblical prophecy, biblical apostleship, biblical Christianity, biblical doctrine, the biblical church and biblical salvation through Jesus. He believed it was about finishing the work that the Bible had started, tying together 'in one' all that had been revealed by God to the other prophets since the beginning of history. For him it was a process of validating and renewing the Bible, of 'proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true, [yet] that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in *this* age and generation, as well as in generations of old'.[56]

[55] 'The Temple', *Times and Seasons* 3/13 (2 May 1842), p. 776.
[56] Doctrine and Covenants 20:11, emphasis added.

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