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Richard H. Cracroft

Chapter Sixteen of Mark Twain's *Roughing It* begins, "All men have heard of the Mormon Bible, but few except the 'elect' have seen it, or, at least, taken the trouble to read it."¹ Conversely, all Mormons have heard of Twain's caustic burlesque on the Book of Mormon, but none seems to have taken the trouble to demonstrate to Gentiles that Twain was obviously one of the multitude who had not read the book. Indeed, the four chapters in *Roughing It* (1872) devoted to the Mormons and their "golden Bible" continue to evoke hilarity from Latter-day Saints, not only because of the burlesque on sacred Mormon institutions, of which Twain was understandably but appallingly ignorant, but also because of the amusingly evident fact that if Twain read the Book of Mormon at all, it was in the same manner that Tom Sawyer won the Sunday School Bible contest—by cheating.

But it doesn't really matter—either the fact that Twain misunderstood Mormon life or the "Mormon Bible"—for Twain was, above all, a humorist and therefore dependent upon the immediate response of his generally American audience, an audience which had preformed and thus very exploitable judgments about the Mormons and their "peculiar institutions." He knew that irreverence, or at least a humor which, says Pascal Covici, presents "a solemn association in a context that is ridiculous and insignificant,"² is a dependable device for setting up that necessary and fruitful tension which Henry Nash Smith has called "two ways of viewing the world," the tension between the "genteel and the vernacular."³

This tension, a ridiculous and ridiculing mixture of the sublime and the profane, is the key to Mark Twain's treatment not only of the Book of Mormon, but other sacred writings as well. Twain reveled in treating the solemn, immutable splendor of the sacred books of the Western and Eastern worlds with a flippant and, for some, shocking earthiness. In dealing democratically with the Holy Bible, the Apochryphal New Testament, the Koran, the Institutes of Menu, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, and the Book of Mormon, Twain demonstrated that he was an iconoclast with a twinkle in his eye.

Mark Twain and the Bible

Mark Twain knew the sacred awe which Americans in general then held for the Holy Bible. As a youth he was, like Huck and Tom, thoroughly

exposed to the Calvinistic interpretation of the Bible, a pious milieu, and devout friends—all of which vigorously cooperated to make young Sam Clemens familiar with God’s Word. The effect of such early learning never wore off, and Twain’s writings, notes Minnie Brashear, reveal a “knowledge of the Bible that would have come only from early and prolonged exposure to the Sacred Book.⁴ Professor Henry A. Pochamnn has counted 124 direct allusions to specific scriptures, and Professor Robert Rees, in his dissertation, claims that “there is scarcely a chapter, an essay, or sketch in Twain’s writing that does not contain a Bible allusion.”⁵

But Twain’s love for the Holy Bible is enigmatic. Janet Brown, in *Mark Twain on the Damned Human Race*, claims that “since Bunyan, nobody in English letters has known or loved the Bible better than Mark Twain,”⁶ while Rees insists that “some of his later writing might tempt one to say that no one in English letters has hated the Bible more than Twain.”⁷ It becomes apparent, on close reading, that Twain did both. He respected the Bible, yet increasingly, grew to disbelieve in its divinity. In *The Innocents Abroad*, for example, he clearly differentiated himself from the pilgrims or believers as they traveled about the Holy Land, and by the time he married Olivia Langdon he was outspoken in his disbelief. For a time he supported Livy in her desire to base their marriage on Christian principles, which included daily Bible readings—but this did not last long. A few months of regular Bible hours provided too much piety for Twain, and he told her:

You may keep this up . . . if you want to, but I must ask you to excuse me from it. It is making me a hypocrite. I don’t believe in the Bible. It contradicts my reason. I can’t sit here and listen to it, letting you feel I believe . . . it . . . [is] the word of God.”⁸

As he grew older, Twain’s philosophy of life became increasingly pessimistic, and he moved from simple disbelief to an unreserved waspishness. By 1887 he was writing in his notebook such statements as, “I believe that the Old and New Testament were imagined and written by man, that no line in them was authorized by God, much less inspired by him.”⁹ And stronger: “God, so atrocious in the Old Testament and attractive in the New—the Jekyll and Hyde of sacred romance.”¹⁰ This changed attitude is seen in his later works and notebooks: “The Bible absurdity of the Almighty’s only six days building the Universe and then fooling away twenty-five years building a tow head on the Mississippi,”¹¹ is a typical example of the jabs the older Twain was taking at the sacred book of his youth. In *Letters from the Earth*, Twain’s humanized Satan writes of the Bible to St. Michael and St. Gabriel: “It is full of interest. It has noble poetry in it; and some clever fables; and some blood-drenched history; and some good morals; and a wealth of obscenity; and upwards of a thousand lies.”¹² Such antipathy is apparently a long distance from the good-natured irreverence of *The Innocents Abroad*.

Yet despite this steadily evolving change in attitude, Twain, Rees rightly insists, “never escaped the challenge of the Bible either in his life or in his art.”¹³ But, after all, escape was unnecessary, for regardless of Twain’s own attitude toward the Holy Bible, he recognized that the scripture was a touchstone of culture, and therefore a source of humor. For example, Twain’s treatment of the Book of Mormon is prefigured in this passage from *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), written some three years before he published *Roughing It*. Twain tells of a pilgrim from the *Quaker City* telling Jack Van Nostrand, the salty Westerner-turned-traveler:

“Here are the Fords of the Jordan—a monumental place. At this very point. . . Moses brought the children of Israel through. . . the desert [after] forty years, and brought them to this spot safe and sound. There. . . is the scene of what Moses did.”

And Jack said: “Moses who?”

“Oh,” he says, “Jack, you ought not to ask that! Moses the great lawgiver! Moses, the great patriot! Moses, the great warrior! Moses, the great guide, who as I tell you, brought these people through these three hundred miles of sand in forty years, and landed them all safe and sound.”

Jack said: “There’s nothin’ in that! Three hundred miles in 40 years! Ben Holiday [stage-coach driver] would have snaked ‘em through in 36 hours.”¹⁴

A similar instance is seen in the little known book *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, where Jim, Huck, and Tom visit Egypt:

And when Jim got so he could believe it *was* the land of Egypt he was looking at, he wouldn’t enter it standing up, but got down on his knees and took off his hat, because he said it wasn’t fittin’ for a humble poor nigger to come any other way where such men had been as Moses and Joseph and Pharaoh and the other prophets. He was a Presbyterian and had a most deep respect for Moses who was a Presbyterian, too, he said.¹⁵

Such humor depends heavily upon the reader’s familiarity with the Holy Bible; and Twain knew his reader.

Thus Twain’s works abound with humorous references to titles, phraseology, allusions, and characters, all vastly more appealing to the American public than the elevated language and material urged upon Twain by some of his sophisticated friends at Nook Farm. Such titles as “Daniel in the Lion’s Den—And Out Again All Right,” “Extracts from Methuselah’s Diary,” “Letter to Satan,” “Eve’s Diary,” “Adam’s Diary,” and many others depend upon evoking serious images in the reader’s mind, images which are immediately startled by their profane use in Twain’s context. Likewise, his use of biblical phrases ranging from “supplication,” “realms of bliss,” and “noble souls” to “spiritual darkness,” and “thousand fold”¹⁶ reveal his habit of “dropping into Biblical language and Biblical rhythms, a device he would use until the end of his days.”¹⁷

As with the use of phrases and titles, Twain's biblical allusions are powerful because they create ludicrous incongruities between the humdrum and the sacred. This is evident in Twain's treatment of a stockbroker's chances of salvation—in "Daniel in the Lion's Den—And Out Again All Right":

I am of the opinion that a broker can be saved. . . . Lazarus was raised from the dead, the five thousand were fed with twelve loaves of bread, the water was turned into wine, the Israelites crossed the Red Sea dryshod, and a broker *can* be saved. True, the angel that accomplishes the task may require all eternity to rest himself in.¹⁸

He often turns to the ignorant blasphemer to enrich his allusions. The supposedly naive *persona* of *The Innocents Abroad* looks in vain for the pillar of salt which was once Lot's wife.¹⁹ And Jack Van Nostrand, in the same book, spends much of a scorching afternoon observing a turtle in order to hear "the voice of the turtle" in the land. And it is Van Nostrand who supposedly says, on learning the price of boat hire on the Sea of Galilee: "No wonder Jesus walked." Perhaps the most delightful of these ignorant blasphemers are the Negroes in Twain's works—the most memorable of which is Jim, whose argument about "Sollermun," loaded as it is with biblical allusions gone wild, is one of the comical high points in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

As is evident in Captain Stormfield's Gabriel, in *Report from Paradise*, and Satan, in *Letters from the Earth*, endowing hallowed biblical figures with unhallowed human traits is another of Twain's irreverent devices. Twain has his favorites—especially Adam and Eve, who figure in "A Monument to Adam," the well-known "Adam's Diary," "Eve's Diary," and the "Papers of the Adam Family." But his most beloved scriptural character—and predictably so—is Satan, for whom he once told his uncomfortable Sunday School teacher that he "had the highest respect."²⁰

Mark Twain, despite his shift from youthful belief to good-natured skepticism, and finally, to a bitter repudiation (but continued exploitation) of the Holy Bible, clearly recognized the Bible's impact upon American culture and himself, and he depended heavily upon his reader's familiarity with the book, and upon his own ability to jolt the acquired sensibilities of the reader by placing the conventional image of the biblical figure (or place) in comic relationship to an earthy or vernacular image. The result is the universal delight which led William Dean Howells to say that Twain, that master of the familiar and the homespun, was the "sole, incomparable, the Lincoln of our literature."²¹ In turning for humor to other scriptural works, including the Apocryphal New Testament, the Koran, and Mary Baker G. Eddy's *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, as well as the Book of Mormon, Twain and his audience are on less familiar ground. In dealing with these books he therefore assumes the mantle of spokesman for the majority, but his humor often becomes more heavy-handed, his

incredulity more undisguised. Generally, he is speaking now to and for the confident, enlightened nineteenth-century American, each certain of the truthfulness and rightness of his own religious beliefs, and of the peculiarity and dubiousness of the claims of any minority religion. Yet Twain uses a number of the same humorous devices applied so effectively in his handling of biblical material. Again, the result is often a breath of fresh air blown through the pages of these writings, old and new.

Humorous Views on Other Scriptures

In the Apochryphal New Testament, for example, which he treats in the second half of *The Innocents Abroad*. Twain discusses such books as "The First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ," and "The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians," writings which are little known, even today, among Christian laymen. In discussing these books, however, Twain is squeamish, aware that, regardless of how preposterous some of the tales surrounding Jesus' childhood may be, he is nevertheless on precarious ground. Still he has some fun. In discussing Clement's epistle he cites the passage, "They carry themselves high, and as prudent men; and though they are fools, yet would seem to be teachers," adding that this scripture should be canonized, as it "so evidently prophetically refers to the general run of Congresses of the United States." (IA, 274.) However, Twain exhibits a lapse in his humor which probably results from his hesitancy to step on ecclesiastical toes or kick sacred cows. Instead of ridiculing the apocryphal books he selects passages which tax the reader's credulity, such as the tale in which the young Jesus strikes a playmate dead for ridiculing his speech, or where Jesus helps Joseph in miraculously "stretching" a throne which has been custom built for Herod but is two inches too narrow.

With the Koran, however, he is less cautious, for he can capitalize on the widespread distaste for Islam throughout the Western world and draw on the contrast between the idealized images concerning the exotic Near East and the unromantic realities which confronted him while traveling among the followers of Mohammed. When told, for example, that Muslims cannot drink from wells and streams which Christian visitors have used and thus defiled, Twain is solaced by a chance thought: "I knew that except these Mohammedans repented they would go straight to perdition, someday. And *they* never repent—they never forsake their paganism. This thought calmed me, cheered me." (IA, 375.) At another point he says, "The Koran does not permit Mohammedans to drink," and he cannot resist adding, and "Their natural instincts do not permit them to be moral." He then attacks the sultan's having eight hundred wives, which "almost amounts to bigamy. It makes our cheeks burn to see such a thing permitted here in Turkey. We do not mind it so much in Salt Lake, however." (IA, 77.)

As he will later do with Mormonism, Twain delights in shooting broadsides at sacred Muslim institutions. He has fun with Mohammed's famous remark, made upon turning away from ancient and revered Damascus, that man could enter but one paradise and "he preferred to go to the one above and then went away without entering its gates." Twain, after visiting the city, adds, "If I were to go to Damascus, again, I would camp on Mohammed's hill about a week, and then go away. There is no need to go inside the walls. The Prophet was wise without knowing it when he decided not to go down into the paradise of Damascus." (*IA*, 176.) He continues this playful irreverence in describing a visit to the stone from which Mohammed allegedly ascended to heaven. The Angel Gabriel, who "happened by the merest good luck to be there" (and who plays a key role in the Koran), seized it at the time of the ascension. Twain says, "Very few people have a grip like Gabriel—the prints of his monstrous fingers, two inches deep, are to be seen in that rock to-day." Twain also points out that Mohammed left his footprints in the solid stone: "I should judge that he wore about eighteens," he smirks.

His treatment of the Hindu faith and the Institutes of Menu (or Manu-Smriti) and the other writings of the Hindus, from the Rg-Veda to the Bhagavad-gita, is again, as with the Koran, less specifically oriented about the writings themselves as about the customs. In the second volume of *Following the Equator* (1897) Twain mocks the endless Hindu pilgrimages around the sacred city of Benares, and concludes by noting that all of the steps to salvation are worthless if the pilgrim should die on the wrong side of the Ganges, for he would come to life again in the form of an ass. This sacred doctrine is irresistible for Twain, for the word *ass* was always a favorite of his, and he writes:

The Hindoo has a childish and unreasonable aversion to being turned into an ass. It is hard to tell why. One could properly expect an ass to have an aversion to being turned into a Hindoo. One could understand that he could lose dignity by it; also self-respect, and nine-tenths of his intelligence. But the Hindoo changed into an ass wouldn't lose anything, unless you count his religion. And he would gain much—release from his slavery to two million gods and twenty million priests, fakeers, holy mendicants, and other sacred bacilli; he would escape the Hindoo hell; he would also escape the Hindoo heaven. There are advantages which the Hindoo ought to consider; then he should go over and die on the other side of the Ganges.²²

However, Twain is full of qualified admiration for the Hindu faith, and he makes this clear. But admiration is not generally the basis of humor, and Twain typically transforms a serious discussion of a revered Swami into mirth when he obtains an interview with the Swami, who is, Twain stresses, a god. During the interview Twain gives the Swami a copy of *Huckleberry Finn*, for "I thought it might rest him up a little to mix it in along with his

meditations on Brahma, for he looked tired, and I knew that if it didn't do him any good, it wouldn't do him any harm." (*FE*, 207–209.) Twain's sense of the comic properly gauges the reader's delight at the audacity of such a turnabout—the obsequious earthling giving the god something to read, to “rest him up.” Thus Twain once again, despite his respect for the institution itself, finds a delightful area in which to loose his powerful wit.

Views on Mrs. Eddy and Her Book

Although a similar kind of respect is generally accorded Mrs. Mary Baker G. Eddy's *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (1875), Twain's close examination of Mrs. Eddy's book is too often hampered by his thinly veiled waspishness. Often funny, the book is nevertheless uneven in its approach, for Twain frequently strays from broad and delightful jabs into a mire of petty pickings, through which the reader soon grows weary of following. The resulting book, *Christian Science* (1907), is a loose and chaotic compilation of several articles which Twain wrote about the movement.²³ It deserves little serious attention, except in our present context of assessing Twain's comic devices in the treatment of holy writ, which the adherents of Christian Science claim *Science and Health* to be. Of especial interest is that the book echoes, in its uneven and often tasteless humor, many of the devices which Twain had used years earlier in his less extensive and somewhat less vitriolic treatment of the Book of Mormon.

He wrote the articles on Christian Science as a disappointed man who had turned hopefully to the movement in his search for a satisfying intellectual answer to the problem of faith. His book is the impatient result of his disillusionment. He predicts, however, that in Christian Science will rise another monolithic power comparable to the Catholic Church or Standard Oil, with all of their totalitarian evils, a prediction which today seems incredible. Twain is cynically critical of Mrs. Eddy's willingness to accept money for her church, a willingness which he refers to time after time in his half-serious, half-mocking analysis of *Science and Health*. Chuckling at the church's claim that the book is the one spoken of in the Book of Revelation, he typically mixes the profane and the sublime to speak in mock praise of

The “little book” exposed in the sky eighteen centuries ago by the flaming angel of the Apocalypse, and handed down in our day to Mrs. Mary Baker G. Eddy of New Hampshire, and translated by her, word for word, into English (with help of a polisher), and now published and distributed in hundreds of editions by her at a dear profit per volume, above cost, of seven hundred percent—a profit which distinctly belongs to the angel of the Apocalypse, and let him collect it if he can. (*CS*, 45–46.)

Twain's professed admiration for the book and predictions for its bright future are not in harmony with his feelings for Mrs. Eddy—so he

spends a great many pages attempting to prove that a ghost writer and not Mrs. Eddy wrote the book, an original but dubious claim.

However, in trying with mock sincerity to ascertain whether God or Mrs. Eddy wrote the book, Twain cites Mrs. Eddy's statement of January, 1901, that

I should blush to write of *Science and Health*, [sic] with *Key to the Scriptures* as I have, were it of human origin, and I, apart from God, its author; but as I was only a scribe echoing the harmonies of Heaven in divine metaphysic, I cannot be supermodest of the Christian Science text-book. (CS, 42.)

After projecting Mrs. Eddy's evidence that the book was indeed written by God, Twain feigns confusion by showing that Mrs. Eddy herself frequently claimed to be the book's author. He quotes her as saying: "When the demand for this book increased . . . the copyright was infringed. I entered a suit at law, and my copyright was protected." Comments Twain: "Thus it is plain that she did not plead that the Deity was the (verbal) author; for if she had done that, she would have lost her case," as, he chuckles, "No Foreigner can acquire copyright in the United States." (CS, 140.) (Had Twain but known, he could earlier have made a similar case against Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet.)

Twain sums up his case in mock confusion, showing that Mrs. Eddy wrote the book but didn't write the book. After reviewing additional statements by her concerning the book's authorship, Twain again summarizes: "1. Mrs. Eddy furnished the ideas and the language.' 2. God furnished 'the ideas and the language.'" And he adds, "It is a great comfort to have the matter authoritatively settled." (CS, 143.) But, he groans, "Is that it? We shall never know. For Mrs. Eddy is liable to testify again at any time." (CS, 143.) This mock confusion, this exaggeration and tearing from context should not offend Christian Scientists, for such piling on of mock evidence merely amuses, though eventually wearies, the reader.

Twain then spends twenty-four pages weighing Mrs. Eddy's *pre-Science and Health* style in the balance and finds it wanting. Citing several instances of bad poetry, careless and ambiguous sentences, dangling and misplaced modifiers, he concludes that "her proof-reader should have been shot." (CS, 119.) One of his many illustrations of such faulty writing is: "His spiritual noumenon and phenomenon silence portraiture." To this he responds:

I realize that noumenon is a daisy; and I will not deny that I shall use it whenever I am in the company which I think I can embarrass with it; but, at the same time, I think it is out of place among friends in an autobiography. . . . [And] you cannot silence portraiture with a noumenon; if portraiture should make a noise, a way could be found to silence it, but even then it could not be done with a noumenon. Not even with a brick, some authorities think. (CS, 119-121.)

Such humorous criticisms, then, are clear echoes of his treatment of the Book of Mormon, thirty-six years earlier. In *Christian Science*, however, Twain's humor is not the light-hearted irreverence of his youth. It is more Juvenalian, based more on the carefully contrived piling on of exaggeration, sneering, and pulling from context than on the quick, sharp, but good-humored jabs of his earlier writing, jabs which made his treatment of Mormons themselves so amusing; though, as shall be seen, his treatment of Mormon scripture was hardly more successful.

Mark Twain's Treatment of the Book of Mormon in Context

Set in the context of his other assassinations of Holy Writ and religious customs, East and West, Mark Twain's humorous treatment of the Book of Mormon and the "peculiarities" of Latter-day Saint institutions becomes more meaningful.

Certainly the Mormons were not strangers to Twain. Hailing from Hannibal, Missouri, Samuel L. Clemens was but three years old when Governor Lilburn W. Boggs issued his infamous "extermination Order" of October 27, 1838; and, though he was then too young to understand the issues, young Sam must have heard a great deal about the Mormons throughout his youth, for the harassed saints settled in Nauvoo, Illinois, only fifty miles upstream from the Clemens' Hannibal home. The Mormon migration westward, along with mysterious tales of Danites, massacres, and polygamy, seem to have fired Twain's imagination just as they fired the imaginations of most nineteenth-century Americans.

Thus, when he had occasion, while enroute to Carson City in 1862, to visit the Saints in their Mecca on the Great Salt Lake, Twain rejoiced at the opportunity to see the nefarious Saints at firsthand, and proposed, tongue-in-cheek, that he might even institute a "much-needed reform" among the poor, benighted souls. The brief visit, loosely recorded in chapters 12 through 17 in *Roughing It*, is a generally fictional account which purports to describe conditions among the Mormons at that time and to "analyze" the Book of Mormon, the sacred book of the Latter-day Saints. Having aroused the curiosity of the reader, Twain appends to his book a long excerpt from Mrs. C. V. Waite's "entertaining book," *The Mormon Prophet and His Harem*, a typical anti-Mormon "history" of the period in which Mrs. Waite charges Brigham Young with ordering, among other atrocities, the infamous Mountain Meadow Massacre of 1857.

Mark Twain's treatment of the Mormons and their institutions is delightful, and the anecdotes which he compiles concerning Brigham Young and polygamy continue to delight readers—Mormon and non-Mormon alike. As a closer look will demonstrate, however, his mock analysis of the Book of Mormon is much more heavy-handed and uneven, and

Twain encounters many of the same difficulties which he would confront thirty years later in writing of *Science and Health*.

Readers of Twain's burlesque "analysis" of the Book of Mormon must constantly keep in mind, as must readers of *Christian Science*, *Innocents Abroad*, *Following the Equator*, or virtually any of Twain's works, that his intention is always to make people laugh. To achieve this end, he wrenches from context, exaggerates, misunderstands (intentionally or unintentionally), and distorts. All of this, in treating any scripture, but especially in treating the Book of Mormon, is to exploit for the sake of humor—and "The Mormon Question" was a popular topic replete with highly humorous potential. Twain's typically funny, irreverent, and pseudo-authoritative dismissal of the Book of Mormon as a non-vicious kind of hoax should therefore be appreciated for what it is, and not dismissed, as it is by some, as a maliciously misguided attempt to write off the Mormons and their book. However, Twain's unfamiliarity with the Book of Mormon, his audience's unfamiliarity with the book, and his obvious strain in groping for humor in the book's content combined to thwart his usual humorous soaring by pinning him to a book which forced him, first, to educate his audience as to the nature of the book; then, second, to make fun of the material he had just introduced. This necessity of setting up his own target before he could fire at it caused Twain to be unsteady in his firing and uncertain in his aim; and more misses than hits occur. Twain would face a similar problem in writing *Christian Science*, but the main difference is that in treating the Mormons there is no veiled bitterness; there is only a sense of real or mock condescension.

Still, in treating the Book of Mormon, Twain applies many of his standard devices—the same mock-serious analysis, the same irreverent, naughty-boy, or belch-in-the-parlor kind of roughshod humor so popular in nineteenth century America. And, as was typical in his treatment of other sacred writings, in order to forestall coming to grips with the text of the book itself Twain spends four of the ten pages devoted to the Book of Mormon in discussing extraneous material—specifically, the non-scriptural introduction to the book. Strangely—or perhaps not-so-strangely—Twain fills the other six pages with two pages of quotation from one chapter in the Book of Ether, one page of commentary on the same chapter, one page of quotation and commentary on two chapters from 1 Nephi; and half a page on several well-discussed verses on polygamy from the Book of Jacob (2:23–26; 3:5). His haphazard use of four relatively unimportant passages from only five chapters of the Book, together with a complete lack of any controlling awareness of the Book's total content, as well as the glaring omission of many possible humorous passages combine with numerous

errors to convince the man who has read the Book of Mormon that Twain has not—he is again perpetrating one of his choice literary hoaxes, this time at the expense of the Mormons.

As has been demonstrated, one of his favorite comic devices is sweeping a sentence from context and distorting it through picking at the wording. Twain got no further than the title page itself, which contains the statement, “. . . wherefore [The Book of Mormon] is an abridgement of the people of Nephi . . . hid up unto the Lord” “Hid up,” says Twain derisively, “is good. And so is ‘wherefore’—though why ‘wherefore’? Any other word would have answered as well—though in truth it would not have sounded so Scriptural.” (*RI*, 111.) Such humorous quibbling prepares the innocent reader for further attacks—and falsely strengthens his confidence in Twain’s seemingly close reading of the text. Twain then moves three or four pages further into the book—still in the introduction—and reproduces the complete “Testimony of the Three Witnesses,” delightfully and irreverently mocking their claim that an angel appeared, showed them the plates, “and probably took [their] receipt for it.” (*RI*, 111.) He follows this with the complete testimony of eight additional witnesses. He ridicules the wording of their declaration and lights perceptively on the fact that the document is signed by eight witnesses—comprised of four Whitmers, three Smiths and one lone outsider. Chuckles Twain, “I could not feel more satisfied and at rest if the entire Whitmer family had testified.” (*RI*, 112–113.) This is good humor, regardless of the tenderness of one’s toes.

Now established in the reader’s mind as an authority on the book, Twain sets about undermining the book as “merely a prosy detail of imaginary history” (*RI*, 110) by “exposing” its faults. What follows is doubly funny to the Latter-day Saint, and at least funny to the non-Mormon reader, for Twain, in every instance, has purposely misread the book. The Mormon reader, like the Christian Science reader, is comforted by Twain’s clear lack of expertise, so he is able to laugh, not only at Twain’s humor, but at Twain’s often stumbling distortions; the non-Mormon can enjoy the humor on the level at which Twain introduces it—as sheer burlesque.

A closer look at a few of the errors in Twain’s gentle mocking of the book again reveals Twain’s method in handling scripture. For example, he turns to the passage in 1st Nephi in which Nephi notes that the family of Lehi used an instrument called the “Liahona” in finding their directions while en route from the Old World to the New. Twain seizes on this instrument as an anachronistic “compass,” noting smugly that the travelers appear to “have had the advantage of Noah,” all the while ignoring the text’s explanation that the so-called compass was a miraculously powered ball—not a magnetic compass—which operated commensurate to the faith of the travelers—indeed, a kind of New World pillar of fire.

A similarly advantageous misreading occurs in his treatment of the Book of Ether (15:2). Twain introduces Coriantumr, an ancient general who experiences the *Götterdämmerung* of his people. Ether writes of Coriantumr at the end of the final battle, “‘there had been slain two millions of mighty men, and also their wives and children,’—say 5,000,000 or 6,000,000 in all [adds Twain]—‘and he began to sorrow in his heart.’” “Unquestionably it was time,” Twain smirks. (RI, 117.) Here the author typically fails to note the facts that Coriantumr had been cursed by God through the prophet Ether to outlive his people unless he repented prior to the battle. Not until the long war has destroyed his people does Coriantumr belatedly recall the words of Ether and humble himself before God. The actual scripture reads:

He saw that there had been slain by the sword already nearly two millions of his people, and he began to sorrow in his heart; yea, there had been slain two millions of mighty men, and also their wives and their children [which I interpret to be included among the two million slain]. He began to repent of the evil which he had done; he began to remember the words which had been spoken by the mouth of all the prophets, and he saw then that they were filled thus far, every wit; and his soul mourned and refused to be comforted. (Ether 15:2–3.)

Unquestionably it was time—for Coriantumr to repent of his sins! But it is funnier the way Twain reads it—especially when he adds the devastating comment that he understands it was the “most remarkable [battle] set forth in history—except, perhaps, that of the Kilkenny cats, which it resembles in some respects.” (RI, 117.)

In an often clumsy attempt to fill pages—typical of Twain at his worst—he then devotes nearly two pages to a transcription of the grand battle described in the Book of Ether, which ends with Ether’s words: “And he went forth, and beheld that the words of the Lord had all been fulfilled; and he finished his record; and the hundredth part I have not written.” Drawls Twain, whose taste was for more exciting stuff, “It seems a pity he did not finish, for after all his dreary former chapters of common place, he stopped just as he was in danger of becoming interesting.” (RI, 119.) Twain’s humor again triumphs over the facts, for in the few pages of this so-called “commonplace” book, (1) God reveals himself physically to an ancient prophet, (2) Jesus Christ appears (several hundred years before his birth), (3) the Jaredites (a pre-Nephite emigrant group) cross the ocean in vessels, (4) two major wars are fought, (5) an important king loses and regains his throne, and (6) curious animals—the cureloms and cumoms—are introduced (surely Twain could have had fun with those!). These “commonplace” events culminate in the massive slaughter at the Hill Cumorah, described by Twain. Yet Twain calls the Book of Ether, which contains

thirty-one of the most exciting pages in the Book of Mormon “dreary” and “common place”! He could have done better than that!

Another error for humor’s sake arises in his treatment of 1st Nephi, the first book in the Book of Mormon. Twain mistakenly claims Nephi finished his “Noah’s ark”—actually a very conventional ship—in a single day. The book contains no specific mention of the time lapse, but the textual implication is clearly that it took some time—at least enough for several incidents of insubordination and for the young and, sometimes at least, self-righteous Nephi to go frequently “into the mount” to receive architectural instructions from the Lord Himself (1 Nephi 17, 18), another event which Twain might have taken advantage of.

One of the grossest distortions, however, lies in Twain’s obviously insecure and ambiguous treatment of 3 Nephi (simply called the Book of Nephi by Twain). The book of 3 Nephi, wherein Jesus Christ appears to the Nephites following his resurrection, is perhaps the most important single book in the Book of Mormon. During his brief stay among the Nephites, Jesus repeats the same gospel preached earlier to his followers in Jerusalem. He organizes a church and bestows his priesthood upon twelve disciples. So unfamiliar is Twain with the Book that he seems uncertain as to whether or not the episodes are embellished recountings of Christ’s life in Jerusalem or new events among the Nephites—a serious misunderstanding unenhanced by any attempt at humor. To recapture his wavering confidence and evoke a bit of humor, he comments on the conclusion of the ministering angels’ passage, which reads, “and they were in number about two thousand and five hundred souls; and they did consist of men, women, and children.” “And what else would they be likely to consist of?” he chuckles. Of course even here he depends heavily upon the reader’s unfamiliarity with the text and upon his own superficial reading, for the original passage is clearly stressing that no one was excluded from Christ’s blessing—a re-emphasis of the “suffer the little children” gesture of Jesus while in Jerusalem.

Though it doesn’t really matter, other insignificant errors abound. For example, Twain enumerates the names of the fifteen books comprising the Book of Mormon and mistakenly includes among them the record of Zeniff, an account contained in the Book of Mosiah, while failing to include the Fourth Book of Nephi. Even his spoof on the Book’s redundant and ubiquitous phrase, “And it came to pass,” is a typically inaccurate though delightful exaggeration. Twain claims that if Smith “had left that out, his Bible would have been only a pamphlet.” (RI, 110–111.) This is a bit of humor which survives the literalist’s observation that foreign language editions of the book, printed without the repetitive phrase, still run

to more than five hundred pages—pages filled, incidentally, with much more matter than Twain manages in his chapter on the Book of Mormon—but far less amusing.

So Twain's desire to spring aboard a popular bandwagon of anti-Mormon sentiment impels him to attack vigorously and humorously a book which he has apparently not read. But had his animosity towards the Latter-day Saints been really serious, he might have attempted a bonafide study of the book, as he did with Mrs. Eddy's book. In that case his chapter in *Roughing It* might have evolved into a more delightful and perhaps more authoritative work. But probably not, for his shallow and often clumsy gropings, while humorous, are too crude, too irrelevant. He misses too many opportunities for far more devastating jabs at the Book, opportunities which a competent humorist such as Twain must certainly have exploited had he enjoyed any degree of familiarity with the Book. For example, Twain accuses Joseph Smith of "smouching" (a word he attributes, in a footnote, to "Milton") the entire book from the New Testament "and no credit given" (RI, 119), and that 1st Nephi is somehow "a plagiarism of the Old Testament" (RI, 115); but he fails to present any specific evidence. His unfamiliarity with the Book causes him to overlook several chapters in 1st Nephi which have been literally "smouched" from Isaiah (although credit is given), as well as the meaty and exciting book of Alma, wherein Alma and his companion have adventures which are strikingly parallel to those of Paul and Timothy; and his confused treatment of 3rd Nephi ignores the fact that many of Christ's words to the Nephites are verbatim quotations from the New Testament (with no credit given). In addition, although he does include the standard note about the passages in Jacob in which the Lord forbids polygamy, Twain ignores too many of the major books and too many of the supposed flaws which critics who have read the Book of Mormon have regularly delighted in pointing out since its first publication in 1830.

Still, some of Twain's dogmatic assertions about the Book are widely appreciated by modern Mormon and Gentile readers alike. His pronouncement that the Book "is such a pretentious affair, and yet so 'slow,' so sleepy; such an insipid mess of inspiration. It is chloroform in print" (RI, 110), is universally quoted—and, some would claim, not totally wrong, and applicable, in fact, to any scripture.²⁴ And Twain's final assessment of the book, often quoted with obsequious condescension by well-meaning ministers (who themselves may not wish to read the book), is phrased so as not to offend anti-Mormon sentiments yet provide at the same time a kind of innocuous sop to the fair-minded reader or the Mormon deafened by Twain's loud, rattling wagon of delight: Says Twain, clothed in his spurious gown of authority, "The Mormon Bible is rather stupid and tiresome to

read, but there is nothing vicious in its teachings. Its code of morals is unobjectionable.” (RI, 119).

On Mormons and Their “*Peculiar*” Institutions

Despite the author’s distortions in treating the Book of Mormon, the reader cannot fail to appreciate Twain’s genius for capitalizing upon the humor found in juxtaposing the profane and the sublime. And the reader must also appreciate, on close reading, that if Twain generally failed in his heavy-handed humorous treatment of the Book of Mormon, he succeeded admirably in his hilarious reporting on the Mormon people and their “peculiar” institutions.

In treating these institutions, Mark Twain is clearly more comfortable. He tells, for example, of taking supper with a “Destroying Angel,” one of that band of saints “who are set apart by the Church to conduct permanent disappearances of obnoxious citizens.” (RI, 91.) Although, as he tells us, he has his shudder ready, he was instead appalled at what he found:

But alas for all our romances, he [the “Destroying Angel”] was nothing but a loud, profane, offensive old blackguard! He was murderous enough, possibly, to fill the bill of a Destroyer, but would you have any kind of an Angel devoid of dignity? Could you abide an Angel in an unclean shirt and no suspenders? Could you respect an Angel with a horse-laugh and a swagger like a buccaneer? (RI, 91–2.)

Here Twain is more at home; he is up to his old tricks again—this time making light of an apparently mythical institution which had nonetheless evoked chills in the backbones of readers of nineteenth century anti-Mormon fiction.

A similar kind of exaggeration is used by Twain to point up the clean and healthy aspects of Mormondom, a fact which some would-be reformers sometimes chose to ignore. He insists that his acquaintances in Salt Lake City “declared that there was only one physician in the place and he was arrested every week regularly and held to answer under the vagrant act for having no visible means of support.” (RI, 96.) But this, and most of the stories which Twain treats in *Roughing It*, must be considered as fiction. Twain was, as ever, out to tell a funny story, not relate history, for by the time he wrote the narrative his stagecoach ride across the plains was a dim memory.

Indeed, years later, when he came to write of his overland trip, he wrote to his older brother, Orion, with whom he had traveled from Missouri to Nevada: “Do you remember any of the scenes, names, incidents or adventures of the coach trip?—for I remember next to nothing about the matter. Jot down a foolscap page of items for me.”²⁵ We can probably

assume, then, that his “study” of the Book of Mormon and his “examination” of Mormon institutions emerged not from some basic irritation or anger, as did his articles on Christian Science, but from the need to fill his funny book about a tenderfoot out West with the kind of rollicking humor which his readers had come to expect. The implications of such a motivation are important. The visit of Twain to Brigham Young as well as the hilarious stories which he recounts about Brigham’s marital difficulties have become even more hilarious with the passage of time. Ranging from the breastpin which Brigham purchased for his “darling No. 6—excuse my calling her thus, as her other name has escaped me for the moment” (RI, 105), to Brigham’s mighty power over his subjects, to the problem of keeping such a household in teething-rings, “papa’s watches,” and bedsteads, which Brigham finally solves by building a bedstead seven feet long and ninety-six feet wide, these anecdotes about Mormon folkways are enduring, classic examples of Twain’s genius for exaggeration and the tall tale, and remain among the choicest gems of literature about the Mormons.

Yet perhaps none of these accounts reveals Twain so clearly as his comment on polygamy. Mocking this time the thousand would-be reformers of Mormon institutions, as well as the Saints, Twain regrets that his stay among the Saints was so short that “we had no time to make the customary inquisition into the works of polygamy and get up the usual statistics and deductions preparatory to calling the attention of the nation at large once more to the matter.” Twain insists, in jest, that he

had the will to do it. With the gushing self-sufficiency of youth I was feverish to plunge in headlong and achieve a great reform here—until I saw the Mormon women. Then I was touched. My heart was wiser than my head. It warmed toward these poor, ungainly, and pathetically “homely” creatures, and as I turned to hide the generous moisture in my eyes, I said, “No—the man that marries one of them has done an act of Christian charity which entitles him to the kindly applause of mankind, not their harsh censure—and the man that marries sixty of them has done a deed of open-handed generosity so sublime that the nations should stand uncovered in his presence and worship in silence. (RI 101.)

This kind of witty twist, in which Mark Twain not only tweaks the noses of the myriad critics of Mormondom but provides a complete turn-about of the standard recommendation by such “reformers” by suggesting, instead, an awful reverence for the polygamist, is typical, as we have seen, of his irreverent treatment of religious themes and holy scriptures in general.

Thus Twain crashes, scrapes, and blasts his way across the toes of many serious-minded Americans—and others—but few are offended, for the familiarly blatant tall-tale exaggerations, distortions, and shocking juxtapositions strike home, not to inflict lasting pain but enduring humor.

On reading Mark Twain's gentle blasphemies, whether concerning the Almighty or His foible-prone creations, everybody, including the victim, has a good time.

Conclusion

In the sunset of his life if such a tranquil image can be rightfully applied to Mark Twain—an admiring lady said to him: “Oh, Mr. Clemens, how God must love you.” After she had left the room Twain remarked to his friends, “She evidently hasn’t heard of our strained relations.”²⁶ The strain was not wholly from Twain’s side, however, for the Almighty, that Inspirer of Holy Writ, may well have looked askance upon this bristling earthling, who, during a long career, had audaciously taken it upon himself to criticize several of the Almighty’s own writing endeavors—as well as those of the prophetic scribes who had served Him so well. So, though most readers, on reading Twain’s treatment of the scripture and customs of God’s people, early and late, learn to chuckle tolerantly at Twain’s amazing sense of humor, most of the same readers come to hope, for Twain’s sake (and their own), that the Almighty has a Sense of Humor proportionate to His greatness.

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1. *Roughing It* (New York, 1959), p. 110 Hereafter: RI.
2. Pascal Covici, Jr., *Mark Twain’s Humor* (Dallas, 1962), p. 118.
3. Henry Nash Smith, *Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), p. 2.
4. Minnie M. Brashear, *Mark Twain, Son of Missouri* (Chapel Hill, 1934), p. 207.
5. Robert A. Rees, “Mark Twain and the Bible: Characters Who Use the Bible and Biblical Characters” (unpubl. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1966), pp. vi–vii. Note that during the publication of this article a book, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, by Allison Ensor (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1969) appeared; the book explores Twain’s treatment of the Bible in depth, affirming many of Rees’ findings.
6. Janet Brown, ed. (New York, 1962), p. 32.
7. Rees, p. 199.
8. Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain, A Biography* (New York, 1912), I, 411.
9. Quoted in Phillip S. Foner, *Mark Twain: Social Critic* (New York, 1958), p. 132.
10. Quoted in William C. S. Pellowe, *Mark Twain, Pilgrim from Hannibal* (New York, 1945), p. 151.
11. Quoted in Pellowe, p. 161.
12. *Letters from the Earth*, ed. Bernard DeVoto (New York, 1962), p. 20.
13. Rees, p. 3.
14. *Mark Twain’s Speeches*, ed. Albert Bigelow Paine (New York, 1935), p. 273.

15. *The Writings of Mark Twain, in the Author's National Edition*, 25 vols. (New York, 1869–1909), 20:116.

16. *Letters from the Earth*, pp. 103–106, *passim*.

17. Gladys C. Bellamy, *Mark Twain as a Literary Artist* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1950), p. 109.

18. *Letters from the Earth*, pp. 103–106, *passim*.

19. *Innocents Abroad*, in *The Writings of Mark Twain*, vol. 2, p. 345. Hereafter: IA.

20. In *What is Man and Other Essays* (New York, 1917), pp. 307–309.

21. William Dean Howells, *My Mark Twain* (New York, 1910), p. 101. The importance of the Bible to Twain can be summarized in an anecdote told by an English friend. On a visit to Twain's hotel room in London, the visitor noticed an open Bible on the desk and asked Twain if he had taken up a study of the scriptures. "'That's a good Book,' Twain answered with his odd drawl. 'That's about the most interesting Book I ever read. Joe Twichell, a person over in Connecticut, recommended it to me, and I have been more interested in it than in any other book I have read for a long time. You better read it yourself. It beats any novel or history or work of science that I have ever tackled. It is full of good stories and philosophy. It suggests lots of ideas, and there's news in it. I find things that I never heard of before. Did you ever know that the English people were mentioned in the Bible? . . . I discovered today that Christ spoke of the British people in the sermon on the Mount.' And, reaching for the Book, he turned a page or two and read, 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth'" (quoted in Pellowe, p. 202).

22. *Following the Equator*, in *The Writings of Mark Twain*, vol. 6, p. 188. Hereafter: FE.

23. *Christian Science*, in *The Writings of Mark Twain*, vol. 15, p. 234. Hereafter: CS. The book is comprised mainly of articles written for *Cosmopolitan* ("Christian Science and the Book of Mrs. Eddy," 27 [Oct. 1889], 585–98, and *Harper's Weekly* (*Mark Twain and Christian Science*," 46 [Dec. 27, 1902], 2022; 47 [Jan. 27, 1903], 145. Note: Eddy's authorized edition of *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston, 1874, 1906) has been used in preparing this paper.

24. Compare Twain's assessment of the Book of Mormon with Thomas Carlyle's dictum on the Koran: "It [the Koran] is as toilsome reading as I ever undertook, a wearisome, confused jumble, crude, incondite."

25. Introduction to RI, p. xiii, by Henry Nash Smith.

26. Quoted in Pellowe, p. 151.