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MORMON, MOSES, AND THE REPRESENTATION OF REALITY

Richard L. Bushman

Abstract: *In this essay, Richard Bushman borrows a critical perspective from Erich Auerbach's Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature. He analyzes the representation of antiquity in two of Joseph Smith's striking translations, the Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses. The two texts, produced within a few years of one another, created distinctive stages on which to dramatize the human-God relationship. The question is: What can we learn from this comparison about God, prophets, and human destiny?*

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See Richard L. Bushman, "Mormon, Moses, and the Representation of Reality," in *Tracing Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses: Inspired Origins, Temple Contexts, and Literary Qualities*, edited by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David R. Seely, John W. Welch and Scott Gordon (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central; Redding, CA: FAIR; Tooele, UT: Eborn Books, 2021), 51–74. Further information at <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/ancient-threads-in-the-book-of-moses/>.]

I have long had a great affection for the Book of Moses, particularly for Moses's vision of the cosmos in chapter one. The beauty and richness of that text is testimony to me of Joseph Smith's inspiration. I have

felt the power and strangeness of the book so strongly. I have asked a number of scholars how they would classify Moses 1 in world literature. Peter Brown, the Princeton historian, dismissed it as a pitiful fraud, which was disappointing, although he is a person I otherwise admire. Anthony Grafton, another Princeton historian, said it reminded him of the books of Esdras in the Apocrypha because of Moses's interrogation of God. A scholar at the Huntington Library thought it resonated with pseudepigraphic texts. After Richard Fox, an American intellectual historian and biographer of Reinhold Niebuhr, read it, he said he was surprised at how beautiful Moses 1 was.

Two things have struck me about the Book of Moses. My first observation is how unlikely it is that Joseph Smith could write such a piece at age 24 with so little training as a writer. Moses 1 intensifies the classic prophet puzzle. The Smiths' neighbors saw no intellectual or moral force in the young Joseph Smith. He was a ne'er-do-well treasure-seeker, notable chiefly for his pretended gift of locating caches of money. Then suddenly, out of a somewhat disreputable life, springs the author who composes the Book of Mormon followed immediately by the Book of Moses. That sequence seems to strain the explanatory power of historicist interpretations to the breaking point. A passage in *Rough Stone Rolling* sums up my feeling:

We can hardly recognize Joe Smith, the ignoramus and schemer of the Palmyra neighbors, in the writings of Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer. The writings and the person seem to have lived in separate worlds. In the neighbors' reports, he was a plain rural visionary with little talent save a gift for seeing in a stone. No flashes of intelligence, ambition, or faith distinguish him. Even his family members, who thought he was virtuous, had no premonition of his powers. They could not envision him writing about Moses' epic encounter with God or telling of God's sorrow over humanity's iniquity in Enoch. In his inspired writings, Joseph entered into other worlds and looked across time and space. Strange and marvelous narratives come from his mouth. No one, friend or foe, expected any of that.

The second marvel, in my opinion, is the difference between the Book of Moses and the Book of Mormon. These two long narratives were completed within a year of one another, and yet they seem to come from different worlds. The translation of the Book of Mormon immersed Joseph in a strongly evoked

history, which is maintained with remarkable consistency throughout the text. And then to open another narrative so sharply different in style and conception so soon after strikes me as a feat straining the capacity of the most adept writers and beyond imagining for one so unpracticed as Joseph Smith.¹

The aim of my article is to explore this second marvel. I wish to delineate the world in which Mormon's narrative takes place and then compare that world to the stage on which the Book of Moses occurs. Both transpire in antiquity; therefore, to honor the theme of the conference, I present my thoughts as a study in comparative antiquities. These representations should not be thought of as objectively real in the sense that anyone who lived them would experience them the way I describe. They are two worlds as two authors have chosen to represent them. They are not reality itself but representations of reality.

I draw inspiration from Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, the classic study of Western literature beginning with *The Odyssey* and Genesis.² I make no pretense to Auerbach's immense erudition or his sensitive analysis of rhetorical stances. I would, however, like to emulate his method of humanistic analysis that Edward Said, in an introduction to *Mimesis*, sums up as "living the author's reality, undergoing the kind of life experiences intrinsic to his or her life."³ I like the phrase "representation of reality." How is the world presented or represented in a work of literature? How does it compare to the realities found in the literary work of other authors?

The most famous example from *Mimesis* comes in the opening chapter, "Odysseus's Scar." This chapter compares the great hero's experience on returning home to Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac to Jehovah. In *The Odyssey*, the much-traveled and weather-beaten Odysseus hides his identity on his return home to avoid being murdered by his wife's many suitors. His old nurse, however, recognizes him when she notices a familiar scar on his neck while bathing him.

The essence of the difference between Homer and the Bible in Auerbach's reading is that in Homer, everything is on the surface, while much is hidden and left unsaid in the Bible. In Homer, everything is out in the open and on a level plane. Homeric language is "externalized." It "uniformly illuminates phenomena, at a definite time and in a definite place, connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground .

. . . thoughts and feelings completely expressed; events taking place in a leisurely fashion and with very little suspense.”

In Genesis, by contrast, “overwhelming suspense is present.” Speech “does not serve, as does speech in Homer, to manifest, to externalize thoughts—on the contrary, it serves to indicate thoughts which remain unexpressed.” There is an “externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity.⁴

I will pay less attention to style than Auerbach does; Grant Hardy has taken us a long way in that direction in his book *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide*.⁵ Instead of examining the language, I will look at landscape or stage. How is the place where the action takes place conceived? What is its geography? How does time function? Who occupies this territory? What are the characteristic plots?⁶ I would like to understand how two texts depict the world: the first in the Book of Mormon running from Mosiah to Moroni, and the second in the Book of Moses chapters 1 through 7. I speculate a little on the life of Mormon, but I am most interested not in him as an individual but in the nature of existence as defined in his text. In the case of Moses, I do not speculate at all on Moses’s life but focus entirely on the world found within the first seven chapters of the book.

Mormon

My view of Mormon’s text is that it is preoccupied with the preservation of society. As an author, Mormon senses the danger of conflict and wickedness leading to self-destruction. The prophets in the Book of Mormon are, of course, concerned about salvation and the kingdom of God, but Mormon also tells stories of societies listening to God’s prophets and flourishing or of the hardening of their hearts and descent into contention and misery. To stage these dramas of survival and decay, Mormon presents us with the mundane world in which they take place. His mind is fixed on evoking the space and circumstances in which societies rise and fall, repent or deny God.

We can imagine why Mormon was preoccupied by preservation. He spent his life as a Nephite general attempting to preserve his own society. He failed, and he knew why. His people would not repent and come unto God. They failed to recognize that only submission to God and renunciation of sin would enable them to triumph over their enemies. Without God, the moral foundations of society crumbled. Whatever Mormon’s skill as a general or how ardently he pled, he could not protect

his people from destruction if they turned against heaven. Mormon's writings present tale after tale of prophets preaching this message. Perhaps as a result of his concern for social righteousness, Mormon had a preternatural sense for the moral conditions of people. He was forever estimating whether the people were living righteously or descending into contention and rebellion. He developed an expertise in assessing the righteousness and wickedness of the people because their lives, as well as their prosperity, depended on it.

His concern for social well-being and preservation led to a rich depiction of the Nephite social order. By instinct or interest, he went to great lengths to create the stage for the Nephite drama. The afterlife, of course, figures into his practical theology: people are to repent so that they may enter into the kingdom of God. But the world beyond is never delineated in detail. Through the account of Alma, Mormon shows an interest in the state of spirits after death, but according to his record of Amulek, the same spirit that possessed people in this life will continue in the immediate afterlife. Things there will be pretty much as they are here on earth. The point of both Alma's and Amulek's sermons is to repent *now*, because circumstances will not be that different in the world to come.

When it comes to this world, on the other hand, Mormon has lots to say. He is keenly aware of government: Who is ruling? Are they worthy kings or judges? Is their reign challenged? Of course, with the mind of a general, he must talk about battles and tactics. He tells us about the organization and growth of the church. The institutions framing human life are all in the forefront of his thinking.

Mormon is interested in sociology. He has three categories for analyzing social structure. The first is tribes or clans, which he seems to think of as the most basic structure, perhaps, as Don Bradley has argued, because the Nephites borrowed the thinking of the Palestinian Jews concerning tribes.⁷ He primarily uses the big categories Nephite and Lamanite, but he is conscious of other "ites," which he leaves out for the sake of simplicity. When Nephite society disintegrates on the eve of Christ's coming, all other forms of government collapse, and the population returns to tribal organization, the most elemental of all.

The second sociological category is rich and poor, a rather crude but powerful grouping. Much of the sin of society arises from the tension between rich and poor. The rich not only neglect the poor but they also disdain them. It is that neglect and exclusion that foreshadows trouble. God cannot tolerate this evil. Eventually, the society that exists after

Christ's visit dissolves this difference, as the rich share generously with the poor.

The third social category is location. People are shaped by the city where they live. Alma visits the various cities to test their righteousness and gauge the state of the nation. He never knows what he will find until he gets there. City populations have distinctive qualities. Traveling the countryside, prophets have varying receptions city by city.

Mormon is preoccupied with geography. Modern geographers struggle to map Mormon's geography onto current knowledge of American space, but it is not for lack of information. There are scores of cities and features like rivers, mountains, or coastlines throughout the Book of Mormon. There are mentions of the wilderness, lands such as Bountiful or Desolation, and routes from place to place. We always know where the battles are taking place. A detailed geographical description is entered almost gratuitously in the story of a royal conversion seemingly as an indulgence of Mormon's obsession with the contours of space (see Alma 22:27–35). Onto this physical geography, he maps the people who occupy each place. Mormon finds all this to be a necessary backdrop for the pursuit of the central plot, the preservation of society.

Mormon is nearly as concerned with time as he is with space. His chronology is almost as insistent as his geography. He is forever marking the year with reference to the reign of the judges or the sign of Christ's birth. When he finds nothing in the large plates worth adding to his record, he merely notes the year to indicate time passing. He is also aware of the deep past and the distant future. He knows he is writing for the future more than for the present. No one around him will read his record save Moroni; all his readers are hundreds of years away, and he often speaks directly to this remote audience. Conceiving time in its broadest frame, Mormon also knows that history proceeds from the creation and fall to Christ, to the recovery of the Book of Mormon in Joseph Smith's time, and on to Christ's Second Coming. He is deeply concerned for the future recovery of his people. So besides working with a year-to-year timeline, Mormon operates within the great framework of God's plan for the earth.

But Mormon is not conscious of one dimension of time that is commonplace today: he is not aware that he lives in antiquity. He has no sense of the old and the new. Today, people have a sense of the progress of civilization from the primitive to the ancient, to the middle ages, to modernity. Throughout the course of history, human society becomes more sophisticated and more competent, if not always more happy.

Mormon has no sense of that kind of change. He approaches Joseph Smith's world as if it faces the same issues that he and Moroni deal with. Time is uniform, not marked by progress; it only repeats the cycle of prosperity and decline. He has a strong sense of before and after but not of old and new. Mormon shares the Christian view of the world working toward the birth of Christ and His Second Coming, but he does not have the Protestant sense of improving the world in preparation for Christ, nor the Hegelian sense of a historical dialectic that moved humanity through stages toward a world governed by reason. For Mormon, there is no fundamental change in the conditions of human life. The issue is always faith in Christ and repentance from sin, versus rejection and decline.

Mormon leaves out a lot of detail from his depiction of Nephite society. There is little about domestic life. Family has a powerful influence: the tribes originate from family conflicts, and we have fathers lamenting their sons' iniquities and mothers raising their sons to be valiant. But this is family life as it impinges on public affairs. There is almost nothing about courtship, the family economy, housing, marital relations, childrearing, or women's status. By the same token, life in the sense of cultural achievements has no place: there is nothing about art, music, libraries, museums, or scientific achievements. Education is totally neglected save for the tutelage of royal offspring in the language of the plates. Schools may have existed, but Mormon does not share any insight about them.

Despite these omissions, social life is well fleshed out. Mormon creates a worldly stage on which the battle for preservation can be fought. His history is earthly in the sense of being staged on this earth and seeking heavily to protect life on the earth.

In this world, God is primarily a judge. He judges whether or not to protect societies according to their righteousness. When we meet him, he will judge us. Have we fulfilled the requirements of the Gospel? If we have, all will be well. If we have not, we will be punished. The Atonement of Jesus Christ serves to protect us from punishment. It is a legal negotiation, according to Amulek, where mercy means we are not subject to the demands of justice. God will help us prosper and rear our children, but the big question is how to escape punishment and achieve forgiveness. As Alma summed up his point to Corianton, "it is requisite with the justice of God that men should be judged according to their works; and if their works were good in this life, and the desires of their

hearts were good, that they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good” (Alma 41:3).

Beyond his functions as a judge, God has no personality in Mormon’s writings. During his visit to the Nephites, Christ expressed very strong feelings. He exhibited what I am calling personality. Remaining in heaven in Mormon’s telling, God the Father comes across as remote and confined in his forms of expression. I may overstate the case here, but it seems to me that in Mormon’s writings, God the Father rarely expresses feelings. He is the governor of history—whether societies flourish or breakdown—and the dispenser of justice and mercy, but he has no expressed desires, hopes, or plans. (There are, of course, exceptions to this rule.)

Mormon delights above all in stories of conversion. The key moments occur when a society turns from sin toward the Lord. Repentance in the sense of turning is the goal of prophetic action. Mormon enjoys telling the successes of the sons of Mosiah and the repentance of the Lamanites in the decades before Christ’s visitation. At those times, destruction of the people is averted and society is set on the path toward prosperity and safety. The prophets speak to deaf ears in many instances. They threaten God’s wrath and the end of society to no avail. In the end, nothing works, and entire peoples are wiped away.

Moses

A year after the completion of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith began dictating the Book of Moses, the early pages of his translation of the Bible. The differences between the two books are breathtaking. Mormon’s feet are firmly fixed on the earth; he is aware of the world around him, of earthly time, of societies struggling for survival, of contention and iniquity. Although he speaks for God, Mormon is of the earth. The Book of Moses is elevated to a sphere so ethereal that we can hardly encompass it. The text tells us that Moses was caught up to an exceedingly high mountain— as high as was possible to go from the surface of the earth— but even then, his feet may not have remained on the mountain top. A few verses later, he “fell unto the earth,” as if he might have been lifted above the mountain (Moses 1:9). Moses’s feet are definitely not planted on the earth. He is suspended in the cosmos.

In the sphere to which he is elevated in Moses 1, there are no tribes, no kings or judges, no chronology of years, none of the forms or institutions of human society. There are humans, there is geography, there is a kind of time, but all are located in cosmic space occupied by cosmic characters.

In the text, Moses does not tramp about the earth with his father as Mormon did, learning the cities and the tribes; Moses looks at the earth from some place outside of it. He does not behold it person by person or city by city as Mormon would have on his trip south. Moses sees every particle of it all at once, all the inhabitants in one view (Moses 1:8, 27, 28). In Moses 1, there is no government and no social structure, only humankind. He sees humanity from a cosmic stand point, viewing the earth comprehensively. He is anything but earthbound.

The cosmos in Moses's vision is divided into great compartments—or realms, as I will call them—each organized around beings. The nature of the spaces into which the universe is divided is based on the nature of the person or persons who dwell in that space. There is the realm of God, where he dwells in glory. The glory is so overpowering that Moses cannot enter this realm without being transfigured (Moses 1:14). To see God, he must acquire spiritual eyes (Moses 1:1). From this realm, Moses can look upon God's workmanship and see the earth in its entirety (Moses 1:27–28).

Then there is the realm of Satan, a realm of no glory. Moses does not have to be transfigured to see Satan. Moses can see Satan's dark realm as a natural man with his natural eyes (Moses 1:15). The cosmos contains these two realms, each with its dominant being but coexisting in their own places. Strangely, God's immense power and glory does not extinguish Satan's realm. Though they have battled, the two coexist. In this cosmos, there is room for variety.

One can scarcely call this a geography, but there is differentiation. To these two realms, we can add the realm of the earths and their heavens. In Moses 1, heaven is not a name for the realm of God. Adam does not meet God in heaven. Heavens are created along with the earths and go out of existence along with their earths (Moses 1:38). As a note, it is possible that "world" is the term used for earths and heavens combined (Moses 1:35). Earth is removed from, perhaps a bit alienated from, the realm of God. Adam must be removed from the earth and transfigured to encounter God in His glory. There is no enmity between earth and God as there is between God and Satan. But humans cannot bear the glory of the godly realm without transfiguration. Moses even remarks that if the transfiguration goes too far, if he enters too much into the realm of glory, he will be unfit to return to earth (Moses 1:5). The two realms are somewhat incompatible.

The great dramas of existence move forward in these three realms: God's, Satan's, and the earth-heavens occupied by humans. In the

telling of Moses 1, the actors on this stage come across as characters. Compared to the somewhat hidden deity in Mormon's abridgement, Moses's leading figures have personalities. Mormon's God administers justice, blesses His people, makes pronouncements, and punishes the unrepentant, but He does not emerge as a distinct person with whom one can interact. By contrast, Moses enters into conversation with God. Like Esdras, as Anthony Grafton noted, Moses asks questions and negotiates. He presses God to explain why there are all these earths and creations. God rebuffs him by saying never mind, but then He relents and gives the famous answer: "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man." God reveals his heart's desire to Moses: "This is my work and my glory" (Moses 1:39). Glorious and mighty as God is in these pages, he is a person that can be talked to.

Moses talks to Satan too, and, not surprisingly, Satan is the most sharply etched character in Moses's cosmic drama. He displays a whole range of emotions. He is demanding: "Moses, son of man, worship me." He is petulant: "Satan cried with a loud voice, and ranted upon the earth, and commanded, saying: I am the Only Begotten, worship me." Wrath overcomes him: "Satan cried with a loud voice, with weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth" (Moses 1:12, 19, 22). There is a play of cosmic forces in this scene, but they are channeled through personalities. Moses is caught up in an argument with a being who has feelings and human reactions. The battle is waged through conversation. The great issues of the universe are worked out by people talking to one another.

Moses holds his own in these encounters with titans. He does not timidly observe the great cosmic personalities in action; he engages them rather boldly. He faces down Satan with the cutting remark that compared to God, Satan is nothing. Moses had to be transfigured to see God; with Satan, "I can look upon thee in the natural man," ending with a little sarcastic tweak: "Is it not so surely?" (Moses 1:14). Not to be put down by this puny mortal, Satan ramps up his game so that Moses begins to "fear exceedingly" and sees "the bitterness of hell" (Moses 1:20). Moses holds on through this tirade and receives strength until Satan, defeated, disappears.

The brave Moses is bold with God too. Impressed but not overwhelmed by his vision of all the souls on earth, Moses ventures to inquire, "Tell me, I pray thee, why these things are so, and by what thou madest them?" (Moses 1:30). The colloquial opening "tell me, I pray thee" sounds like an inquiry one might make of an English gentleman who had shown you his garden. God at first rebuffs Moses's question: "For mine own

purpose have I made these things. Here is wisdom and it remaineth in me” (Moses 1:31). But Moses will not give up. The question is too urgent. “Be merciful unto thy servant, O God, and tell me concerning this earth, and the inhabitants thereof, and also the heavens.” Knowing he is being brassy, Moses adds, “then thy servant will be content” (Moses 1:36).

The chapters that follow Moses 1 take place on earth, yet the cosmic personalities of the first chapter continue to color the narrative. The earthly and cosmic realms intermingle. While Mormon’s history is fixed on the earth and surrounded by places, people, and institutions, the narrative of the Book of Moses is raised above the earth. The Book of Moses looks down most of the time, but it frequently turns its gaze up into the heavens. In the book as a whole, the narrator has access to both earth and heaven, moving easily from one to the other. The narrator’s position is foreshadowed in the Lord’s early comment, “Behold, I reveal unto you concerning this heaven, and this earth” (Moses 2:1). The narrator seems to dwell in both realms at once, moving the storyline from heaven to earth without a jolt. Perhaps because of this middling position between heaven and earth, the human figures are abstracted from mundane reality. By the same token, the narrator can hear voices in heaven as well as on earth. It does not require a special transformation to quote God at length. Humans converse with supernatural characters as if they were easily accessible. God and Satan enter into the flow of the narrative without any fanfare, as if they were characters in the story.

Moses 1 serves as an introduction to the Genesis story because in the Bible, Genesis 1 comes closest to the cosmic familiarity of Moses 1. In Genesis 1, God also speaks freely and expresses his desires as a character in the story. The Genesis God is not quite as familiar as his equivalent in Moses. God’s statements in Genesis begin with “God said”; in Moses 2, they begin with “And I, God, said,” in the Moses version of creation, we not only hear a report of what God said but we are also right there, listening to his voice. The story is told in first person singular. Moreover, celestial beings come and go in the earth sphere in the regular flow of events. Humans talk to God and Satan, ask questions, and receive their ministrations.

Because the Moses narrator occupies a middle position between heaven and earth, he can insert stories of heaven into the account of Adam in the garden without a rupture. At the moment when Satan is about to enter the picture, God goes back into his own realm to tell of the pre-earth conflict with Satan. Readers effortlessly leave the earth for a time and learn of Satan’s offer to be God’s son and redeem mankind

(Moses 4:1–4). The interjection does not seem like an invasion because the narrator has moved into God’s realm before. That interplay of realms can be easily managed from the middle position the narrator assumes throughout the book of Moses.

In Moses’s narrative, the appearance of Satan as a serpent and the subsequent arrival of God in the garden in the cool of day seems perfectly natural. Of course God will speak about one’s errors while dismissing the serpent for his deceit. If one is naked, the Lord God will see to the manufacture of clothing (Moses 4:27). This is God as a character in a story, a personality, who can move between heaven and earth without ceremony. This portrayal of God is quite different from the one in Mormon’s world, where God delivers pronouncements from heaven and remains aloof while people dwell in a mundane world.

I hope that the distinction between the worlds of Moses and Mormon is becoming clear. One is so mundane, so aware of earthly society with its geography and chronology, and only occasionally do voices from heaven deliver pronouncements. In the other, the details of human society are vague and slightly blurred while supernatural figures come and go. The differences extend to the representation of God. Mormon’s God is primarily a judge who delivers laws and requires repentance but otherwise remains obscured. The God of Moses is a creator who comes to earth and converses with his people. He is majestic but also a mentor and a coach, trying to bring people along.

Enoch’s story, of course, is an extreme example of this free interplay between heaven and earth. His origins are vague, not really anchored in a place. Enoch, the son of Jared, “journeyed in the land, among the people” (Moses 6:26). What land, what people, we do not know. This is nothing like Alma’s journey from Zarahemla, “over upon the east of the river Sidon, into the valley of Gideon, there having been a city built, which was called the city of Gideon, which was in the valley that was called Gideon, being called after the man who was slain by the hand of Nehor with the sword” (Alma 6:7). And then Alma went from Gideon back home for a rest and then “over into the land of Melek, on the west of the river Sidon, on the west by the borders of the wilderness” (Alma 8:3). All that specificity, those journeys from one known city to another in certain valleys along certain borders, is Mormon’s standard form of explanation. In Enoch’s story, geography almost disappears, emerging only vaguely as a journey “from the land of Cainan, by the sea east” (Moses 6:42).

A comparison of two narratives from Mormon and Moses—Benjamin’s farewell sermon in Mosiah 3 and Enoch’s first sermon to the people in Moses 6—highlights the differences. Both sermons are based on divine communication (from an angel to Benjamin and the words of God to Enoch), but the stages on which the sermons are given take entirely different forms. We are loaded with details about Benjamin’s circumstances: he is retiring as king and turning the kingdom over to his son; he orders his people to gather so they can hear his final counsel; they sit as families in front of their tents; Benjamin builds a tower so they can hear; and when they still are out of distance, he orders his words written and distributed. We see the scene in great detail. There is nothing so specific in Enoch’s story. After receiving a call to prophecy among the people, Enoch “went forth in the land, among the people, standing upon the hills and the high places” (Moses 6:27, 37). That is all. Enoch seems to rise above ordinary reality into surreal space. One hearer says of him, “there is a strange thing in the land; a wild man hath come among us” (Moses 6:38). We know little about the circumstances of Enoch’s preachment save the strange business that the hearers who came to listen told the tent-keepers to “tarry ye here and keep the tents, while we go yonder to behold the seer” (Moses 6:38). When asked to tell plainly who he is, Enoch explains that he “came out from the land of Cainan, the land of my fathers . . . And it came to pass, as I journeyed from the land of Cainan, by the sea east, I beheld a vision; and lo, the heavens I saw, and the Lord spake with me, and gave me commandment” (Moses 6:40–42). A land of origin and a vision of God: those details and no more identify Enoch, nothing like Benjamin’s well-defined position on the tower and his listeners in their seats before their tents.

From then on, Enoch’s sermon drifts from his words to the words of God, to the words of Adam interrogating God and back to God himself for a long explication of baptism. Enoch, God, and Adam are all intertwined in one protracted discourse (Moses 6:51–63). Such words float about in a world where Enoch can take hold of them as he chooses. Adam floats about too. At the end of the explanation of baptism, the Spirit catches Adam up and carries him away to be baptized (Moses 6:64). This is a dream world where time and space impose no restrictions. All sorts of words, all sorts of movements, are available in this surreal space, far different from Benjamin’s world where he stands on a tower to deliver a specific angel’s words to people, sitting in front of their tents, everyone firmly fixed on the earth.

In Moses 7, Enoch climbs Mount Simeon, the heavens are opened to him, and he is clothed with glory and talks to the Lord face to face (Moses 7:3–4). The vision shown to him has more specificity than Moses’s view in the first chapter. Enoch sees specific people and specific lands, but like Moses, he sees them in one grand sweep (Moses 7:6–9). He does not travel to these lands as Mormon did; he sees them from on high.

It is no surprise when Enoch’s city is taken up into heaven. That sort of transit between heaven and earth is commonplace in the Book of Moses. Space and time are easily overcome. From the mid-point where the narrator has situated himself, it is easy to observe this kind of transfer. Moses can also see Satan with a great chain when he looks up and laughs (Moses 7:26). He also sees angels descending out of heaven, bearing testimony of the Father and Son. It is also not surprising when Enoch catches God weeping. Nowhere in scripture, to my knowledge, is there a more intimate picture of God than in Enoch’s exchange with a sorrowful deity. Nowhere do we find God’s character—his feelings, yearnings, and regrets—so fully revealed. This is far from Mormon’s stern judge delivering His pronouncements. This is a God in anguish, perhaps the most personal God in all of scripture.

We have in Moses an antiquity of a different order than that found in Mormon’s history. First, Mormon’s mundane specificities—the detailed geography, the strict time-keeping, the social order, the government—give way in Moses to cosmic scenes, to unfettered movements through space and time, and to divine concourse. Moses introduces us to other worlds and shows little interest in the details of earthly existence that so absorb Mormon. Second, the interaction between the two spheres is of greatest interest to Moses. He pays no attention to the details of politics or the struggles of nations, which are central themes in Mormon’s writings. Moses scarcely mentions the preservation of society. He attends, rather, to the mingling of the heavenly and the earthly, to the visits of supernatural beings, and to conversations with God. Moses is absorbed in cosmic conflicts between God and Satan and the struggles of God to make the earth work, not the wars of Nephites and Lamanites. Third, Mormon’s God is a remote God, often a judge, not forthcoming about himself; while in Moses’s world, heavenly persons freely converse. They are personalities, characters in the story. They bare their souls.

Both antiquities are the legacy bestowed on us by Joseph Smith’s writings in 1829 and 1830. I can’t begin to understand how both worlds could come out of this young man’s mind in that brief period. But the two of them profoundly shape our culture. We have the Church that is

rooted in the earth. It builds cities, sells lands, organizes city councils, flees from persecution, marks a path camp by camp across the continent. “Come, Come Ye Saints” is its hymn. It organizes wards, ordains people to the priesthood, sends people on missions, constructs chapels, takes care of the poor. It is definitely the Lord’s church through the eyes of Mormon. Our aim is to establish a society based on righteousness, faithful to God, believers in Christ, repentant always, producing strong and generous men and women to do the Lord’s bidding. We seek a Zion society that will endure. Mormon would understand what we have begun and loved it.

But we are also the Lord’s church through the eyes of Moses. We believe in the angels who came to Joseph Smith. We believe in seer stones, the gold plates, and the Liahona. We gladly received the priesthood from Christ’s disciples coming down from heaven. We tell our children about pre-mortal life and the three degrees of glory. Its characteristic song is “The Spirit of God.” Our temples take us into Moses’s realm. When we sit in ordinance rooms, Adam and Eve are there, Satan appears, Peter conducts the meeting, and in the end we meet God face to face. The pioneers who, in Mormon’s fashion, faced down the wilderness were empowered by their congress with beings from Moses’s cosmos.

I think this combination is peculiarly Latter-day Saint. We are what we are because we dwell both with Mormon and Moses. It is the hard-nosed practicalities of Mormon that make us tough. It is Moses’s exultant conversations with God that give us hope and endurance. We can manage impossible tasks because we have angels on our side. One can ask where the balance lies at the present moment. In individual lives, the balance differs, no doubt, but as a people, both Mormon and Moses speak to us.

Discussion

Matthew J. Grow:

In your introduction, you speak about how the Book of Moses has long resonated with you—the words it uses, the power, beauty, richness, strangeness—and part of that, you say, is because of how it speaks to this prophet puzzle, this kind of contrast between the Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses. I wonder if you might speak a little bit more: what is it about the Book of Moses that has resonated so strongly with you?

Richard L. Bushman:

When I was growing up, I loved the mysteries of God. One great appeal of the Latter-day Saint gospel was its cosmic excursions. As missionaries, we debated these at great length because they were so enthralling. I think that's still true for lots of young Latter-day Saints, particularly intellectuals. In that frame of mind, the Book of Moses was meat and drink. The orders of heaven, Kolob, and other such matters were immensely appealing. Some of this kind of doctrine appears in sections 84 and 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants, but its richest source, as Terryl Givens has pointed out, is the Pearl of Great Price, especially the Books of Moses and Abraham.

Matt:

So, have you become less of a Moses and more of a Mormon as the years have gone on, Richard? You're saying that in your early years, cosmology captivated you and was the meat and drink?

Richard:

As you grow up and take on Church assignments, the practicalities of making an organization work and helping people through the struggles of life bring you down to earth. But now I'm working on a book about the gold plates, so I find myself drifting back to the world of Latter-day Saint marvels. I think they are a valuable part of our heritage. We are focused so much on practicalities, finding comfort, solving our problems, that we may lose sight of the cosmos. I hope that doesn't happen.

Matt:

Yes, let's hope not. So it was so interesting to me, this idea of how this contrast between Moses and Mormon helps create Latter-day Saint culture. And you say that combination is so peculiarly Latter-day Saint. I was trying to think that through, because on the one hand, it would seem that most religious cultures have this tension between this worldly and the other worldly, or the mundane and the ethereal. What is it particularly about that combination, Richard, that you see as so uniquely Latter-day Saint?

Richard:

I think that we have more dramas. We have people and characters and scenes in heaven. We take the war in heaven seriously. We see a version of

it reenacted in our own temples. These events are part of our sacramental life, as well as our intellectual and scriptural life. If you ask a Mormon, “What’s the purpose of life?” you soon find yourself in the pre-existence. The mysteries are much more dramatized and explicit in Latter-day Saint teachings than in most other religions.

Matt:

Thanks. That makes sense. Another thing I was curious about, Richard, was the contrast between Mormon and Moses. I think it was laid out so persuasively in your essay: the contrasts in their viewpoint, their approach, the way they thought, the way they approached society. And I was curious about the similarities as well. If you were to be pushed, what are the similarities? What unifies Mormon and Moses?

Richard:

They’re all oriented around God. He is the source of power and authority, the source of joy and salvation. Through all the scriptures, the overarching question is this: How can humans live peacefully and joyously with God and each other? Mormon talks a lot about salvation in the afterlife, but he is also very much aware of salvation on earth and how to avoid contention and flourish. In the Book of Moses, the good society leaves the earth. Not until the very end of the book is there any hope that human society can be redeemed. But the goal is the same. With different emphases, both texts are concerned about trying to find a society that can be peaceful and godlike.

Matt:

Thank you. That’s great. You mentioned Abraham earlier, and it sounds like you would place Abraham’s viewpoint much closer to the Moses viewpoint or the Moses approach. I was wondering if you might say a little bit more about that.

Richard:

The third chapter of Abraham has as much cosmology in it as any scripture. It is probably our richest source of cosmology. At the end, the statements about councils creating the earth open a view of heaven that’s quite different from anything elsewhere. Abraham is probably our most radical book. It’s the one that contrasts the most with standard Christian theology.

Matt:

Thanks. I've got a couple of questions now from the audience, Richard, that I'm going to read. The first keeps us on this connection between Mormon and Moses. And it says, "Might we have a connection between Mormon and Moses through Moroni and the brother of Jared?"

Richard:

Absolutely. But Mormon doesn't write about the brother of Jared. That's Moroni. The book of Ether is very much in the Moses tradition. God touching the stones resonates deeply with the Book of Moses. My analysis dealt with the books from Benjamin to the final letters of Mormon in the Book of Moroni.

Matt:

Yes. Now we have a question that takes you off of Mormon and Moses, if you'll entertain it. We have an audience member who wants to know, "If you were to write *Rough Stone Rolling* today, what would you change?" Is that a fair question in this conference?

Richard:

I am glad I don't have to write *Rough Stone Rolling* today. The Joseph Smith papers make the sources readily available, but it would be a lot of work to go through them all. I wish John Turner luck as he starts his biography of Joseph Smith. The greatest addition to *Rough Stone Rolling* would be more on women. I should have named every one of Joseph Smith's wives, given them at least that much. I knew it was a problem, but I just couldn't think fast enough to give women their fair due in the book.

Matt:

Okay. Thanks for those reflections. One more question has come in about the Book of Moses: "Does the Book of Moses influence our understanding of the documentary hypothesis?"

Richard:

I am very interested in the documentary hypothesis, which posits that the biblical text we know is a blend of many texts pulled together by various editors. As we all know, the Book of Mormon has a lot to say about the documentary hypothesis as we watch Mormon editing all

those texts — documents — to produce his summary. In the same vein, it is notable that the Book of Moses is much more elaborate than the Book of Genesis. That implies that there are various accounts of Moses's adventures with God, which in turn suggests that the Bible is an edited version of what was known about Moses. All that information offers support to the idea that the Bible is the result of later editors working with a variety of texts to produce a synthesis.

Matt:

Thank you, Richard, for the thought that you've put into this topic over many, many years, and the way that you encapsulated this really crucial contrast between Mormon and Moses.

Mark Ashurst-McGee:

Your comment earlier about your young years of marvel makes me think of a tension in the current church, where we have overcome some of our more simplistic and mythological understandings of some events in early church history, which is good. But how do we learn and mature without losing our sense of awe and marvel and wonder and reverence?

Richard:

Mark, I am with you one hundred percent in those sentiments. I think the magical side of our belief is a precious heritage we must never abandon. One of my aims in writing about the plates is to revive interest in an object that invokes the marvelous. We are so eager for cosmopolitan sophistication that we are tempted to cast such things aside or consider them irrelevant. One of Joseph's effects was to slow or reverse the disenchantment of the world. I think we want to join him in holding on to angels, interpreters, Liahonas, and visions. We must continue to explore the cosmos with Moses and Abraham. That sense of being part of a divine drama and enveloped in heavenly power has energized Mormonism from the beginning. We don't want to give it up now.

I think the magical frees and emboldens us. It promises help in escaping the limits of human life. Think of Lois Lane flying through the sky in the arms of Superman. She was liberated by his great powers. With him, anything was possible. Joseph's view of heavenly powers does something like that for us.

Mark:

Thank you, Richard, for this response. I can't wait to see how your work on the golden plates invokes the marvelous.

I've been teaching a section of "Foundations of the Restoration," and one of the ways I've been trying to connect historical scholarship with marvelous wonder is by using Google Earth and series of geographical images to take the students from a map of the US to the state to the county to the township to the property to the building to the room, et cetera, and trying to firmly ground the precise setting of a foundational event in the minds of the students. This is a bit tedious, but the built-up sense of spatial grounding pays off (I think) when this now-familiar setting is then suddenly irrupted by the First Vision or Moroni or the plates or Elijah, et cetera.

*Richard Bushman was born in Salt Lake City in 1931 and brought up in Portland, Oregon. He received his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Harvard University and taught at Brigham Young University, Boston University, and the University of Delaware. He retired as Gouverneur Morris Professor of History at Columbia University in 2001 and was visiting Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies at Claremont Graduate University from 2008 to 2011. He is the author of a number of books including *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. He served as Co-General Editor of the *Joseph Smith Papers* until 2012 and in 1997 founded the Mormon Scholars Foundation that fosters the development of young Latter-day Saint scholars. He is now co-director of the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts in New York City. With his wife, Claudia Bushman, he is the father of six children and twenty grandchildren. He has served as a bishop and stake president and currently is patriarch of the New York Young Single Adult Stake.*

Notes

1. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 142–43.
2. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013 [orig. pub. 1953]).

3. Edward Said, "Introduction to the Fiftieth Anniversary Edition," in Auerbach, *Mimesis*, xiii.
4. Said, "Introduction," xviii–xix.
5. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
6. My aim has also been voiced by James Kugel in *The God of Old*. He says in his preface that an author's text can reveal "something crucial about how that person saw and understood things." See James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 1.
7. Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Missing Stories* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Press, 2019).

