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## JOSEPH SMITH AS A CREATIVE INTERPRETER OF THE BIBLE

Heikki Räisänen

My involvement in biblical studies has also awakened in me an interest in other holy books. Early on I had the opportunity to do some work on the Qur'an, a fascinating combination of things familiar and unfamiliar for a biblical scholar. I had a vague hunch that, in a somewhat similar way, the Book of Mormon might make exciting reading, but a contact with that book and its study came to be established quite accidentally. During a sabbatical in Tübingen in the early eighties I came across a review of the volume *Reflections on Mormonism: Judeo-Christian Parallels*, edited by Truman G. Madsen, which had appeared in 1978.<sup>1</sup> I got hold of the book in the wonderful University library, started reading, and after a while found myself engaged in a modest investigation of my own of Joseph Smith's legacy.<sup>2</sup> In this talk I shall try to explain what it is that fascinates me in this legacy as a biblical scholar (as an outsider both to Mormonism and to the study of Mormonism).

*Reflections on Mormonism* consists of papers given by top theologians of the mainstream churches at a conference held at Brigham Young University. From an exegetical point of view, I found most fascinating the contribution of Krister Stendahl, a leading New Testament scholar who passed away just a few months ago. In an article that anyone interested in our topic should read he compares Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew with its counterpart in the Book

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<sup>1</sup> Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University.

<sup>2</sup> See H. Räisänen, "Joseph Smith und die Bibel. Die Leistung des mormonischen Propheten in neuer Beleuchtung", *ThLZ*, vol. 109 (1984), 81-92 and idem., "A Bible-Believer Improves the Bible: Joseph Smith's Contribution to Exegesis" in H. Räisänen, *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma: Exegetical Perspectives on the Encounter of Cultures and Faiths* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 153-169.

of Mormon.<sup>3</sup> In 3 Nephi the risen Jesus preaches to the Nephites in America a sermon which is largely similar to Matthew 5–7. Stendahl applies to the 3 Nephi sermon the redaction-critical method developed in biblical studies: he compares it with the Sermon on the Mount in the King James Version (KJV; the translation of the Bible known to Joseph Smith and his environment) and points out new emphases found in the Book of Mormon account.

### **Matthew and 3 Nephi**

The Sermon on the Mount opens with a series of ‘beatitudes’: blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are they that mourn, etc. The 3 Nephi sermon does so, too, but it starts with ‘extra’ beatitudes not found in Matthew. In them, the significance of faith (and baptism) is stressed: ‘blessed are ye if ye shall believe in me and be baptised... more blessed are they who believe in your words...’ (3 Nephi 12:1–2). In Matthew’s sermon there is no talk about faith in Jesus and in his words.

Another characteristic enlargement is the addition to Matt 5:6 (3 Nephi 12:6). The Gospel of Matthew in the KJV here reads: ‘Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.’ 3 Nephi adds: they shall be filled ‘with the Holy Ghost’.

Stendahl points out that amplifications of this kind are well known from the early history of the Bible. They are formally similar to changes made to the biblical texts in the Targums, the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible. They are also comparable to the recasting of biblical material in what is called pseudepigraphic literature (works later written in the name of biblical characters which did not become part of the Bible itself, e.g., the books of Enoch). Stendahl writes: ‘The targumic tendencies are those of clarifying and actualizing translations, usually by expansion and more specific application to the need and situation of the community. The pseudepigraphic ... tend to fill out the

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<sup>3</sup> “The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi”, in Madsen (ed.), *Reflections on Mormonism*, 139–154; reprinted in K. Stendahl, *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 99–113.

gaps in our knowledge ... the Book of Mormon stands within both of these traditions if considered as a phenomenon of religious texts.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of content, the additions to the Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi could be labelled Christianising or spiritualising. To be more precise, the 3 Nephi sermon with its tendency to centre upon faith in Jesus gives Matthew's sermon a Johannine stamp. (On the whole in Matthew, Jesus presents a religio-ethical message about the Kingdom of Heaven which includes a reinterpretation of the Jewish Torah, whereas in the Gospel of John he himself stands in the centre of his own message.) Elsewhere in 3 Nephi, too, the image of Jesus 'is that of a Revealer, stressing faith "in me" rather than what is right according to God's will'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed the sermon in question is followed in 3 Nephi by speeches which take up themes known from the Gospel of John (3 Nephi 15-16).<sup>6</sup>

A redaction-critical analysis of the Book of Mormon thus produces a major surprise to a conventional mainstream-Christian mind: it reveals that 3 Nephi is at central points 'more Christian' than is the Sermon in Matthew - more Christian, that is, if conventional doctrinal theology of the mainstream churches is taken as a criterion of what is 'Christian'. Both in standard Christian proclamation and in the 3 Nephi sermon the person of Jesus acquires a salvific significance which it lacks in Matthew's sermon - and largely in the gospel of Matthew as a whole, where the main function of Jesus seems to be 'to make possible a life in obedience to God'.<sup>7</sup> From a mainstream Christian point of view, there is nothing peculiar in the fact that the Sermon on the Mount is viewed through Johannine spectacles. On the contrary, the Book of Mormon is quite conventional at this point. For it has been typical of doctrinal Christian thought at large to interpret the Synoptic Gospels

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<sup>4</sup> Stendahl, "Sermon", 152.

<sup>5</sup> Stendahl, "Sermon", 151.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. D.J. Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 47.

<sup>7</sup> Luomanen, *Entering the Kingdom of Heaven: A Study on the Structure of Matthew's View' of Salvation*, WUNT/2 101 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 285.

(Matthew, Mark and Luke) from a Johannine (or Pauline) point of view. But whereas others have been content to explain the Sermon on the Mount from an Christological view-point extraneous to the Sermon itself, the Book of Mormon includes the explanations within the Sermon.

As was already mentioned, precedents for this way of handling biblical texts are found in the Targums and in the Pseudepigrapha. Not just there, however. We should go further and note that the alteration of earlier texts, often for theological reasons, is a common phenomenon even in the processes which led to the birth of biblical books themselves. Stendahl referred in passing to the retelling of the historical accounts of the books of Samuel and Kings in the books of Chronicles as 'a kind of parallel to what is going on in the Book of Mormon';<sup>8</sup> the stories are retold in what may be called in a more pious key. One could also point to the astonishing freedom with which Paul interferes with the wording of his Bible (our 'Old Testament') when he quotes it (in more than half of the cases he makes changes that make the text better suit his argument).<sup>9</sup>

The spiritualising of Matthew 5:6 in the Book of Mormon actually continues a development which started within the New Testament itself. For it seems that the Gospel of Luke has preserved an earlier form of the saying (presumably from a lost collection of Jesus' sayings which scholars call the Sayings Source or 'Q'). Luke writes in his Sermon on the Plain (which is his counterpart to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount): 'Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled' (Luke 6:21 according to the KJV). A saying which here speaks of actual hunger of the stomach is given a religious-ethical content by Matthew, when he lets Jesus here speak of hunger (and thirst) 'after righteousness' (in Matthew, 'righteousness' is a term which refers to humans' doing of God's will). The Book of Mormon continues this development, moving fur-

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<sup>8</sup> Stendahl, "Sermon", 145.

<sup>9</sup> D-A. Koch, *Die Schrift als Zeuge des Evangeliums: Untersuchungen zur Verwendung und zum Verständnis der Schrift bei Paulus*, BHT 69 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986), 186-90.

ther in a 'spiritual' direction: ye shall be filled 'with the Holy Ghost'. Stendahl commented that 'there is nothing wrong in that; it is our common Christian tradition and experience to widen and deepen the meaning of holy words'.<sup>10</sup>

### Joseph's Starting-Point

Conventional Christian theology has blamed Joseph Smith for falsifying Jesus' words to fit his own theology. This criticism is patently biased, for biblical writers themselves proceed in just the same way when using each other's works, even in reinterpreting Jesus' words. This happens in the Synoptic Gospels (we saw how Matthew spiritualises a saying which is found in a different form in Luke); it happens on a much larger scale in the Gospel of John, where Jesus speaks in a manner quite different from the Synoptics (both in terms of form and of content). But the reinterpretation of sacred tradition in new situations by biblical authors took place at a stage when the texts had not yet been canonised. The New Testament authors did not know that they were writing books (or letters) which would one day be part of a holy scripture comparable to and even superior to their Bible (our 'Old Testament') in authority. When the writings of Matthew, Luke or Paul had reached that kind of position, they could, in principle, no longer be altered. The adjustment to new situations and sensibilities had to take place by way of interpreting the texts, in many cases by twisting their 'natural' meaning. I say 'in principle', for before the inventing of the printing press, when the texts were manually copied by scribes, the practice was different: it often happened that 'where the scribe found the sacred text saying something unworthy of deity, he knew it was wrong and proceeded to correct it as well as he could'.<sup>11</sup> A mediating position, as it were, between preserving the text and changing it, is taken by an-

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<sup>10</sup> Stendahl, "Sermon", 154.

<sup>11</sup> E.C. Colwell, *The Study of the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 55.

notated Bibles such as the Geneva Bible<sup>12</sup> from the sixteenth century or the Scofield Reference Bible<sup>13</sup> from the early twentieth century; these translations are provided with a wealth of marginal notes that guide the reader and easily come to share the authority of the text proper in his or her mind. Joseph Smith stands in this tradition, but he treats the sacred texts in a more radical manner.

In his fascinating book *Mormons and the Bible*, Philip Barlow describes the 'Bible-impregnated atmosphere' in which Mormonism was born as follows: 'Joseph Smith grew up in a Bible-drenched society, and he showed it ... He shared his era's assumptions about the literality, historicity and inspiration of the Bible.' But 'he differed from his evangelical contemporaries in that he found the unaided Bible an inadequate religious compass'. Instead of turning to scholarly or ecclesiastical authority to address this lack, he 'produced more scripture - scripture that at once challenged yet reinforced biblical authority, and that echoed biblical themes, interpreted biblical passages, shared biblical content, corrected biblical errors, filled biblical gaps ...'<sup>14</sup> One may call him a Bible-believer who wanted to improve the Bible.<sup>15</sup>

The Bible had been praised in the Protestant churches as the sole norm for Christian faith and life. In practice this did not work too well. Many a reader could not help noting that the Bible was sometimes self-contradictory and could lend support to mutually exclusive practices and doctrines, and indeed the Protestant decision to give the Bible into the hands of lay readers in their own language soon caused split after

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<sup>12</sup> See Chr. Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 56-63.

<sup>13</sup> J. Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 191.

<sup>14</sup> L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of Latter-Day Saints in American Religion* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11-12. See further R. L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 84-108 ("A New Bible").

<sup>15</sup> Cf. T.L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 191: 'Apparently Joseph was not speaking entirely tongue in cheek when he wrote, in response to the question "wherein do you differ from other sects?", that "we believe the Bible."'

split even within Protestantism itself. Moreover, the Bible contained some features that were theologically or ethically problematic. Joseph Smith stood up to defend the biblical message and the biblical God, perhaps against Deist critics like Tom Paine, but probably just as much to silence the doubts arising in the minds of devout Bible-readers (like himself). In a good Protestant fashion, Joseph Smith thought that, in the Bible, God had provided humans with his infallible Word. Since, however, there are undoubtedly mistakes and shortcomings in our Bible, Joseph inferred that at some point the book must have been corrupted in the hands of its transmitters. In its original form the Bible must have been blameless.

In a similar way Muslims have claimed that Jews and Christians have corrupted the text of the books which they had received through their prophets and messengers, with the result that the Bible no longer fully conforms to the original message now restored by the Qur'an; some early Christians had blamed Jewish scribes for cutting out prophecies about Jesus from their Bible. Interestingly, a related idea occasionally surfaces even in modern evangelical fundamentalism, when no other way to eliminate a problem seems to exist: it is reluctantly admitted that the extant copies of the Bible do contain an error, but then the original manuscript (which is, of course, no longer available) must have been different.<sup>16</sup>

Some scholars insist that discussion of the original 'autographs' was commonplace in religious literature in Smith's time.<sup>17</sup> But Joseph Smith made the necessary textual changes openly. What the Bible ought to look like according to him is shown by the Book of Mormon, which repeats more or less freely large parts of the Bible, as well as Smith's subsequent 'translation' of the Bible, sometimes called the 'Inspired Version'.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 279–84.

<sup>17</sup> Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 54 n. 29.

<sup>18</sup> The work was so named in 1936 by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints who had first published it in 1867. See R.J. Matthews, 'A

### Joseph Smith's 'Translation of the Bible': The 'Inspired Version'

The little known Inspired Version (IV) is a most interesting document from the point of view of a biblical scholar. Smith was probably aware that others were trying to improve the Bible (by way of modernising its language, paraphrasing it and paying attention to alternative readings in ancient manuscripts).<sup>19</sup> He set out to do the same – yet not by way of meticulous study but through revelation, or prophetic insight. In this project he worked closely together with Sidney Rigdon, a former Baptist minister, who was far more versed in the Bible and is assumed to have influenced him a great deal.<sup>20</sup>

Although the IV has not functioned as scripture in the Mormon church, it is an important and interesting source for someone who wants to get a picture of Joseph Smith as a 'biblical critic'. His changes show how much there was in the Bible that caused difficulties for a simple believer. His point of departure is the inerrancy of God's word: revelation cannot be contradictory, not even in small details. Thus, when Joseph Smith notes contradictions, he eliminates them. Many of his actual devices are familiar from the arsenal of today's evangelicalism.<sup>21</sup> The difference is that where evangelical commentators resort to harmonizing exegesis or other kinds of expository acrobatics, the IV alters the text itself.

I should perhaps mention at this point that my way of speaking of the IV as a work reflecting the thought of Joseph Smith conforms to the language used by Philip Barlow, a Mormon scholar. His approach differs strikingly from that of some earlier studies which try to describe, resorting to rather complicated hermeneutics, the IV as a real transla-

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*Plainer Translation*. *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible: A History and a Commentary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), esp. 168–70.

<sup>19</sup> Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 47.

<sup>20</sup> Davies, *Introduction*, 43.

<sup>21</sup> I have not investigated the matter but can imagine that many of them may also have been known to and used by American preachers of the early nineteenth century. Had Joseph heard preachers explain away contradictions between the gospels in the way he was to do in the IV? Did Sidney Rigdon perhaps call his attention to such problems and their current solutions?

tion.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, Barlow interprets the IV in redaction-critical terms as a product of Smith's creative interpretation, based on his prophetic consciousness. Barlow rightly finds a close analogy to Smith's 'prophetic license' in the work of biblical writers.<sup>23</sup>

### Examples

A wealth of examples of Joseph Smith's innovations is presented by Robert Matthews in his magisterial study of the IV.<sup>24</sup> I repeat some of his observations, but discuss them from a somewhat different perspective; I also add examples not adduced by Matthews.

How did Judas Iscariot die? The statement 'he hanged himself' of the KJV (Matt 27:5, IV Matt 27:6) is expanded in the IV: 'on a tree. And straightway he fell down, and his bowels gushed out, and he died.' Thus the account is brought (more or less) into harmony with Acts 1:18 which says nothing about a suicide through hanging himself, but states that Judas 'purchased a field ... and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out'. The same explanation is found in evangelical commentaries even today, for instance as follows: 'If he hanged himself from a tree located on a high cliff, above a valley, and if then the rope broke and the traitor fell on rocky ground, the result could very well have been as pictured in the book of Acts'.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Notably Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 233–53.

<sup>23</sup> Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 57–61, esp. 60f. The reader will have noticed that I deal with the *Book of Mormon* in similar terms. I thereby side with those 'particularly liberal Latter Day Saints' referred to by Davies, *Introduction*, 64; cf. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 174–84 (who is critical of such 'innovative attempts'). See further Räisänen, *Marcion*, 167–69.

<sup>24</sup> Matthews, *Plainer Translation*, 285–389. An invaluable tool for purposes of comparison is *Joseph Smith's "New Translation" of the Bible*, with Introduction by F. H. Edwards (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1970) which offers 'a complete parallel column comparison of the Inspired Version of the Holy Scriptures and the King James Authorized Version'.

<sup>25</sup> W. Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 949–50. Cf. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 304.

The number of angels at Jesus' tomb is not the same in all Gospels: a second angel (as in Luke 24:4 and John 20:12) is introduced into the narratives of Mark (16:3 IV) and Matthew (28:2) as well.<sup>26</sup> However, Smith has more devices at his disposal than a modern evangelical expositor. The latter must show that no extant version is wrong; when numbers differ, he must choose the highest one. When Matthew (8:28) mentions two healed demoniacs and Mark (5:2) just one, Mark too must be thinking of two, though he does not care to mention both.<sup>27</sup> By contrast, Joseph Smith has removed the second demoniac from Matthew's story (Matt 8:29–35 IV); both Matthew and Mark now speak of one healed person. In a similar way Smith has removed the ass from Matt 21:2 and 7 (Matt 21:2, 5 IV) so that Jesus now rides to Jerusalem on one animal only (the colt) as in Mark 11:2, 7 (whereas he according to the Greek text of Matt 21 rides both on an ass and on a colt!).<sup>28</sup> The synoptic gospels mention that two thieves were crucified along with Jesus. But while Mark (15:32) and Matthew (27:44) tell us that both of them joined those who mocked Jesus for not being able to help himself, Luke (23:40–43) gives a different account: one joined the mockers, but the other blamed him, said that Jesus was innocent and

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 305–06. By contrast, Joseph Smith does not touch the problem of the divergent accounts of the various women at the tomb which caused much headache already to the church fathers; see H. Merkel, *Die Widersprüche zwischen den Evangelien: Ihre polemische und apologetische Behandlung in der Alten Kirche bis zu Augustin*, WUNT 13 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1971), 108, 141.

<sup>27</sup> Thus already Origen; see Merkel, *Widersprüche*, 102–103.

<sup>28</sup> This oddity is obviously a result of Matthew's misunderstanding of Zechariah 9:9, a text which he quotes in 21:5 (21:4 IV). The prophet states that the king of 'daughter Sion' will come 'sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass'. Undoubtedly the original text of Zechariah has only one animal in view; the mention of the 'colt' in addition to the 'ass' is a typical feature of Hebrew poetry (*parallelismus membrorum*). Matthew has taken the 'doubling' of the ass literally; in order to make the fulfilment correspond completely to the prediction, he lets Jesus use both the ass and the colt (however one may visualise this). It seems that Joseph Smith has understood the nature of the poetic parallelism, for he lets the mention of both animals stand in the quotation (Matt 21:4 IV) while removing the ass from the narrative.

asked Jesus to remember him when coming into his kingdom. Joseph Smith introduces the penitent thief from Luke into Matthew's account, too, well (Matt 27:47-48 IV) and harmonises Mark's narrative with that of Luke by stating that 'one of them who was crucified with him, reviled him' (Mark 15:37 IV).

Problems of this sort (and also many of the solutions suggested) were well known already to the church fathers of the third and fourth century who were bothered by them, since they threatened the faith of some. To remove the slightest chance of contradiction, Origen even suggested (as a possibility) that there may have been four thieves crucified with Jesus (two of them mentioned by Matthew and Mark and the other two by Luke)!<sup>29</sup>

The statement in Matt 23:2 'all therefore whatsoever they [the scribes and the Pharisees, v. 1] bid you observe, that observe and do' seems to contradict a number of other gospel passages: why should Pharisaic ordinances be obeyed by the followers of Jesus? Joseph Smith makes an insertion that removes the problem: 'all, therefore, whatsoever they bid you observe, they will make you observe and do'.

A more serious (notorious) exegetical and theological problem is posed by the different statements on sinning Christians in 1 John. In 2:1 the author states: 'these things I write unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate ...' Yet in 3:9 he claims that 'whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him and he cannot sin ...' So can a Christian sin or not? Joseph Smith removes the contradiction. In his version 1 John 2:1 reads: 'if any man sin and repent...'. And rather than claiming that a Christian cannot sin, 3:9 states that 'whosoever is born of God doth not continue in sin; for the Spirit of God remaineth in him ...' The picture is now coherent, and it conforms to the traditional picture of Christian life.

There is an intriguing difference between the Old Testament and the Gospel of John. John (1:19) claims that 'no man hath seen God at any time'. But in the Old Testament Moses is allowed to see God, if only his 'back parts' (Ex 33:23), and quite a few other biblical persons

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<sup>29</sup> Merkel, *Widersprüche*, 107-108.

are reported to have seen God as well.<sup>30</sup> The IV takes seriously the Exodus account (and perhaps Joseph's own vision of God and Jesus)<sup>31</sup> and enlarges the sentence in John's Gospel: 'no man hath seen God at any time except he hath borne record of the Son'.<sup>32</sup>

The use of the divine names in the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses) was one of the reasons which once led historical critics to formulate a famous source theory: in the Pentateuch different narratives (which deal differently with God's names) are woven together into one single story. In the story as it stands, the name Yahweh is first revealed in Ex 6:3: God says that he has appeared to the patriarchs 'by the name of God Almighty, but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them' (KJV). Nevertheless humans have used the name JEHOVAH/Yahweh in Genesis narratives already. In the IV the problem is cleverly solved through a slight change in wording in that the end of the verse is turned into a rhetorical question: I appeared 'as God Almighty, the Lord JEHOVAH. And was not my name known unto them?'<sup>33</sup>

The imminent expectation of the end by the early Christians and even by Jesus himself has always been a problem for conservative exegesis. Here too Smith presents an interpretation which, in its intentions, agrees with evangelical exegesis. Once again the difference is that he does not resort to expository acrobatics, which many evangelical commentators do, but frankly changes the difficult texts themselves. In the IV Paul does not claim that 'we' are still alive when the Lord comes, but that they who are alive shall not 'prevent' (i.e., precede) those who are asleep (1 Thess 4:15). 1 Cor 7:29 does not announce that 'the time is short': it says that 'the time that remaineth is but short, that ye shall be sent forth unto the ministry'. Hebrews 9:26 does not claim that Jesus

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<sup>30</sup> The patriarchs, the seventy elders of Israel in Moses' time, etc. For a list see Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 302.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 52.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Smith is very alert on this issue, for he has made similar corrections to 1 John 4:12 and 1 Tim 6:15-16 as well. See Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 302.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 309-10.

has appeared 'in the end of the world' but 'in the meridian of time'. The statement 'this generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled' (Matt 24:34) is expanded as follows (Matt 24:35 IV): 'This generation in which these things shall be shown forth, shall not pass away, until all I have told you shall be fulfilled.' Correspondingly, it is not 'ye' (the disciples listening to Jesus, verse 33 in KJV) who shall 'see all these things', but 'mine elect' (verse 42 in IV). It is made clear that Jesus knew that the disciples will no longer be alive when the last things begin to happen.<sup>34</sup>

Alterations are also made where the implied notion of God seems offensive. As the Deists had made clear, God does not repent (if he did, he would hardly be God). But in the opening of the Flood story in KJV 'it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth' (Gen 6:6-7). In the IV (8:13) it is, by contrast, Noah who repented that the Lord had created man. The statement 'it repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king' (KJV) is replaced with 'I have set up Saul to be a king and he repenteth not ...' (1 Sam 15:11). Nor does God do bad things. 1 Sam 16:14 claims that 'an evil spirit from the LORD' troubled Saul; in the IV, however, Saul is troubled by 'an evil spirit which was not of the Lord'. In the IV God never hardens the heart of the Pharaoh either; it is always the Pharaoh himself who hardens his own heart (e.g. Ex 10.1, 20, 27; in the KJV it is now God,<sup>35</sup> now the Pharaoh<sup>36</sup> who is the subject of the hardening). In Acts 13:48 the KJV states that, as a result of Paul's preaching, 'as many as were ordained to eternal life believed'; the IV changes the order of the verbs and thus removes the embarrassing idea that man's destiny may be foreordained: 'as many as believed were ordained unto eternal life'. The petition 'lead us not into temptation' in the Lord's Prayer is changed into 'suffer us not to be led into temptation' (Matt 6:13); interestingly, the wording of the prayer

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 347.

<sup>35</sup> E.g., in the Exodus passages just mentioned.

<sup>36</sup> E.g., Ex 7:14, 9:34. The discrepancy is often taken as an indication of the use of different sources by the final composer(s) of the Pentateuch.

here differs from that given in 3 Nephi, indicating that an interpretative process was going on in Joseph Smith's mind.<sup>37</sup>

Thus far I have indicated that there are parallels to Joseph Smith's treatment of the Bible in the works of the church fathers on one hand and in those of conservative evangelicals of today. But parallels can be found in other camps, too – for instance in new translations which try to avoid the offence caused by the patriarchal world-view of the Bible. In a recent translation of the New Testament, published by the Oxford University Press, for instance the saying 'No one knows the Son except the Father' (Matt 11:25) is rendered as follows: 'No one knows the Child except the Father-Mother ...' Or take the Contemporary English Version of 1995. Its translators wanted to produce a Bible that cannot be exploited for anti-Jewish purposes; they therefore decided not to use the word 'Jew' at all in the exclusive sense as the enemy of Jesus in the New Testament. In more conventional translations the gospel of John in particular speaks of 'the Jews' (a term used by John ca. 70 times) in such a disparaging way and even seems to drive a wedge between Jesus and his disciples on one hand and 'the Jews' on the other (e.g., John 13:33) – as if Jesus and his circle were no Jews at all!<sup>38</sup> As a Bible-believer who improves the Bible Joseph Smith begins to look rather less idiosyncratic than he may have seemed at first glance.

Yet perhaps the most striking of Joseph Smith's innovations is a feature which is already prominent in his earlier Book of Moses: according to him, humans are from the very beginning aware of Messiah Jesus' future mission. They even have in advance the chance to enjoy the salvation offered by him. The IV clearly teaches that 'the ancient prophets, from Adam to Abraham ... taught and practised the gospel; they knew

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 51.

<sup>38</sup> This is, in my view, an unfortunate feature of the original and not due to any incompetence of earlier translators. Incidentally, it is a feature which the IV has *not* changed; even there we read, for instance, that 'the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he ... said ... that God was his father' (John 5:18).

Christ and worshipped the Father in his name'.<sup>39</sup> A number of additions and expansions to the KJV in the IV make this clear.

God decreed to Adam's descendants that they had to repent, and promised: 'And as many as believed in the Son, and repented of their sins, should be saved' (Gen 5:1-2 IV). So the gospel was preached right in the beginning (Gen 5:44-45), even before the Flood. In one of the IV's numerous additions to Genesis, Enoch summarizes what God had told Adam:

'If thou wilt, turn unto me and hearken unto my voice, and believe, and repent of all thy transgressions, and be baptized, even in water, in the name of mine Only Begotten Son, who is full of grace and truth, which is Jesus Christ, the only name which shall be given under heaven, whereby salvation shall come unto the children of men; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost...' (Gen 6:53 IV).

The long speech of the patriarch is summarized in the following words: 'This is the plan of salvation unto all men, through the blood of mine Only Begotten, who shall come in the meridian of time' (Gen 6:65 IV). Adam was indeed actually baptized (Gen 6:67 IV).

For all the problems that Joseph Smith's solutions may involve, he certainly has acutely sensed a problem in the Bible, touching a sensitive point in the notion of salvation-history. The New Testament, too, hints at God's eternal plan of salvation. But what is one to think of this plan, if Christ actually opened a new way of salvation which was unknown to the ancients, as many New Testament writings, especially Galatians, seem to suggest? Did God himself lead the Israelites astray by giving them a law which promised them life (e.g., Lev 18:5) - which it, according to Paul, was unable to give (e.g., Gal 3:21) - and in no way suggested that it was just a provisional arrangement? Or is this a misapprehension, so that the way to salvation was indeed open to ancient

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<sup>39</sup> Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 328. In the Book of Mormon, too, prophets and preachers repeatedly proclaim the future coming of Jesus Christ which is described in detail in advance; for some passages see Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 199.

generations, too, if they repented of their sins and gladly accepted God's law? But in that case, if the people of old could reach salvation, what was Christ really needed for? Had God's first plan failed so that he now came up with a better idea? This would make Christ an emergency measure on God's part.

Either way, we are caught in a dilemma. One has to relativise either the immutability of God's plan (the conviction that God does not change his mind) or the crucial significance of Christ. The problem surfaces in 1 Clement, an early writing which did not quite make it into the final New Testament. Clement confirms in New Testament terminology that God has from eternity always justified everyone in the same way: through faith (1 Clem 32:4). God 'gave those who wanted to turn to him, from generation to generation, opportunity for repentance' (1 Clem 7:5). This implies that the difference between Christians and the pious men and women of the Old Testament disappears. Clement maintains the immutability of God's plan, but the price he pays is that the role of Christ becomes vague. In fact, Paul already faced the same problem (though he seems to be unaware of it), when he introduced the figure of Abraham as the first Christian (as it were) in Gal 3 and Rom 4. If Abraham was justified by faith, and faith without works as the road to fellowship with God was thus a possibility open to humankind more than a millennium before Christ, why was it necessary for God at all to send Christ?

Like Clement of Rome, Joseph Smith definitely holds that 'God had always related to man on the basis of his faith, and any other terms would, indeed, make God mutable'.<sup>40</sup> But unlike Clement, Smith does not let Christ's role become vague; he projects the Christian soteriology in its totality on to Paradise. Obviously he has sensed the artificiality of the standard christological reading of the Old Testament as it stands. If the Old Testament really is a testimony to Christ (as

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<sup>40</sup> R. Hullinger, *Mormon Answer to Scepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1980), 122. Ironically, Joseph Smith himself set forth in his later revelations that God actually made progress in his own development; cf. Hullinger, *Mormon Answer*, 135 n. 4.

Christians of all times have asserted), then should it not actually speak of Jesus in straightforward terms?

Smith does not appreciate the idea of development in the biblical thought-world, which is self-evident for modern historical study, but in purely logical terms his solution is admirable. Nor is he quite alone in his absolutely christocentric exposition of the primeval stories. A Christian addition (perhaps from the second or third century) to the Jewish pseudepigraphon, the Testament of Adam, lets Adam teach his son as follows:<sup>41</sup>

I have heard, my son Seth, that the Messiah<sup>42</sup> is coming from heaven and will be born of a virgin, working miracles and performing signs and great deeds, walking on the waves of the seas as upon boards of wood, rebuking the winds and they are silenced, beckoning to the waves and they are stilled; also opening the eyes of the blind and cleansing lepers and causing the deaf to hear. And the mute speak. And he shall cast out evil spirits, and raise the buried from the midst of their graves. Concerning this the Messiah spoke to me in paradise ... (Test of Adam 3:1-3).

Actually it can happen in the midst of mainstream Christianity today that the biblical text is supplemented in a similar vein. The Children's Bible by Anne de Vries provides an example. This Christian bestseller (originally published in Dutch), sold in millions of copies, appends several mentions of Jesus to Old Testament stories when paraphrasing them for children.<sup>43</sup> The story of the Fall ends with the promise that one day a child would be born that would be stronger than Satan. 'Who would this child be? The Lord Jesus. When Jesus would come, God would no longer be angry ... When they [Adam and

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<sup>41</sup> The passage was adduced as a parallel by J.H. Charlesworth, "Messianism in the Pseudepigrapha and the Book of Mormon", in Madsen, ed., *Reflections on Mormonism*, 120-21.

<sup>42</sup> According to another reading: 'God'.

<sup>43</sup> I had a German translation at my disposal: A. de Vries, *Die Kinderbibel* (Constance: Friedrich Bahn Verlag, 1981 [first ed. 1954]). The following quotations are translated from pages 14 and 21.

Eve] thought of that they became again a bit glad.' To Abraham the promise is given: 'Your children will live in the land, and later Lord Jesus will be born there.' It is also said that Abraham yearned for this remote day.<sup>44</sup>

In the IV, the law does not become a problem in the way it does in standard Christian theology, for Adam already learned that animal sacrifices are 'a similitude of the sacrifice of the only begotten of the Father' (Gen 4:7 IV). The typological theology of the cultic law presented in the Epistle to the Hebrews is projected into the beginnings of salvation history. Christ has brought the law to an end, for it was fulfilled in him (3 Nephi 9:17; 29:4) who, being identical with the God of Israel, was also the giver of the law (3 Nephi 29:5). He is actually the law and the light (3 Nephi 29:9). Except for the identification of Father and Son, the Book of Mormon agrees in these statements with classical solutions presented by the early church fathers.<sup>45</sup>

In presenting the story of Israel basically as a Christian story and the Hebrew Bible as a thoroughly Christian book, Joseph Smith brings to a head a tendency which is present, in a somewhat 'lower key', in mainstream versions of Christian doctrine as well. I think it is worth keeping in mind that throughout Christian history this Christian reading of the Hebrew Bible has been one of the sources of anti-Jewish sentiments. It is all the more striking that Mormonism has apparently never succumbed to this temptation. It would have been easy to argue as follows: If salvation in Jesus and baptism in his name was the point of biblical religion all the time, surely the Jews who do not recognise this must be utterly blind or ill-willed? And if all this Christian talk about salvation-history was once part of the Old Testament, but later disappeared and had to be restored by the IV, then the Bible must have been viciously amputated by Jewish scholars (who else)? Early church

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<sup>44</sup> De Vries, *Kinderbibel*, 14, 21 (my translations from the German).

<sup>45</sup> On Christ as the giver of the Old Testament law in patristic writings see M. Werner, *Die Entstehung des christlichen Dogmas* (Bern & Leipzig: Verlag Paul Haupt, 1941), 209-11. E.g., the 'mediator' of the law in Gal 3:19 is identified with the pre-existent Christ.

fathers inferred just this from the fact that most Jews did not recognise their Christological reading of the Hebrew Bible; how much easier would such an inference have been on the basis of the IV, where Jesus need not be searched between the lines as his coming glory shines openly on so many pages?<sup>46</sup> But neither Joseph Smith nor his followers drew such conclusions, very much to their credit. Their strong identification with biblical Israel seems rather to have led to a friendly attitude and to a respectful dialogue with Judaism. No doubt it has been an asset that the actual ‘parting of the ways’ between Judaism and Christianity, which was such a sore problem during the early centuries, was no longer an issue when Mormonism was born.

Back to the New Testament! One further problem connected with the continuity of salvation history in the New Testament is Paul's talk of the law as the cause of sin, or of its function of increasing sin.<sup>47</sup> Joseph Smith weakens many such statements. But then many church fathers, too, in opposing the radicalism of Marcion who rejected the Old Testament altogether, took efforts to render the apostle ‘harmless’ on such points.<sup>48</sup> How could God's law be a burden or even a curse (Gal 3:10, 13!), connected with sin? Surely it would be normal to think that the function of the law is to prevent sin or to fight against it? But Paul goes unexpected ways and actually parts company with almost all other early Christians on this point.

Thus, Paul speaks in Rom 7:5 of the ‘motions of sins’ in our members ‘which were by the law’ and worked ‘to bring forth fruit unto death’ (KJV). The IV, however, lets the apostle speak of the ‘motions of sins, which were not according to the law’. Later in the same passage

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<sup>46</sup> Similar questions are, of course, to be addressed to Anne de Vries' *Children's Bible*, quoted above.

<sup>47</sup> E.g., Gal 3:19, Rom 5:13, 7:5, 7:7–11, 1 Cor 15:56. See H. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, WUNT 29, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 140–50.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. M.F. Wiles, *The Divine Apostle: The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 52; Werner, *Entstehung*, 233 (both with reference to Origen). Origen denied that Paul spoke so negatively of the Torah (that would have been to fall into the heresy of Marcion); what he meant was ‘the law in our members’.

Paul, according to the KJV, describes the fatal role of the law in bringing about death as follows: 'I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death' (Rom 7:9-10). This blackening of the law is avoided in the IV which renders the verses thus: 'For once I was alive without transgression of the law, but when the commandment of Christ came, sin revived, and I died. And when I believed not the commandment of Christ which came, which was ordained to life, I found it condemned me unto death.' Even the claim of verse 7:11 that sin was able to use the law as its springboard ('sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me') is toned down in the IV: 'For sin, taking occasion, denied the commandment and deceived me.'

The close connection which Paul here establishes between law and sin is flatly denied by Joseph Smith. Many modern interpreters will assess this as a dilution of Paul's allegedly profoundly dialectical view of the law. Others, including myself, find that Paul's view is beset with difficulties;<sup>49</sup> Smith exhibits common sense in regarding only the transgression of the divine law as a negative matter, not the law itself. As stated above, most church fathers were of the same opinion. John Chrysostom observed that if the effect of the 'commandment' of the law is to engender sin, then logically even the precepts given by Christ and the apostles in the New Testament would have had the same effect; 'this particular charge could never be directed against the Old Testament law without involving the New Testament also'.<sup>50</sup> Therefore (he inferred) Paul must have meant something else, and indeed Chrysostom watered down Paul's assertions in Rom 7:8 and 7:11 in his exposition of the verses. Once more Joseph Smith finds himself in good company.

Finally, I wish to call attention to a passage where Joseph Smith's interpretation proves amazingly modern. In Rom 7:14-25 Paul speaks of the misery of a wretched 'I' who is not able to do the good he wishes to do; in fact, no good at all. The passage is often taken as a de-

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<sup>49</sup> Räsänen, *Paul and the Law*, 149-50 and passim.

<sup>50</sup> See Wiles, *Divine Apostle*, 57.

scription of Paul's (and anyone else's) Christian life. This, however, would contradict Paul's general picture of life in the Spirit, not least in the immediately following chapter (Romans 8) and also in the preceding chapter (Romans 6).<sup>51</sup> This is why a great number of modern biblical critics think that Paul must really mean non-Christian existence 'under the law'; the use of the 'I'-form is understood as a rhetorical device.<sup>52</sup>

Sensing the problem the IV anticipates these critics and thoroughly alters the KJV text (while still assuming that the 'I' denotes Paul himself): 'I am carnal, sold under sin' (KJV) now becomes 'when I was under the law, I was yet carnal, sold under sin' (Rom 7:14). Then a stark contrast to 'I was carnal' is created with the aid of an insertion: 'But now I am spiritual.' The sequel 'For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that I do not ...' (Rom 7:15 KJV) is replaced with: 'for that which I am commanded to do, I do; and that which I am commanded not to allow, I allow not' (IV). A number of other changes in the same vein follow.<sup>53</sup> The IV consistently transforms the apparent tension of flesh and spirit in the speaker's heart into a contrast between two succeeding stages in his life. The modern alternative that the 'I'-form is rhetorical and that Paul is speaking of the non-Christian under the law has, understandably, not occurred to Joseph Smith.

The IV even omits the last clause 'with the flesh [I serve] the law of sin' (7:25 KJV) which some modern scholars have ascribed to a

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<sup>51</sup> Matthews, sharing the view that Paul is speaking of himself, notes that 'these are strange statements, coming from a man like Paul so many years after he had experienced the cleansing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is even contradictory for Paul to say these things about himself when in many other instances he declared that Christ had made him free, and that through the power of Christ he was able to walk no longer after the flesh but after the spirit. (This is the substance of what he says in Romans 8, of the King James Version ...)'. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 358–59.

<sup>52</sup> See for the arguments, e.g., J. Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, TPI New Testament Commentaries (London: SCM Press, 1989), 189–95.

<sup>53</sup> Matthews, *A Plainer Translation*, 359–60 offers a clear comparison by printing the two texts in adjacent columns and typographically indicating the differences.

post-Pauline interpreter.<sup>54</sup> Both these scholars and the IV let Paul close the chapter with the statement ‘with the mind I myself serve the law of God’ (7:27 IV). If the modern mainstream interpretation is on the right track, then Joseph Smith’s interpretation of the passage seems to be closer to Paul’s intentions than was, e.g., the influential interpretation of Martin Luther (who took Paul to be describing Christian life from the point of view of an Augustinian monk conscientiously scrutinising his inmost thoughts and always finding them wanting).<sup>55</sup>

### **Conclusion**

There is much to be learnt from Joseph Smith’s implicit criticism of the Bible. He belongs to the large number of serious and sincere readers who wrestle with the problems that the Bible poses to them, since it is not exactly the kind of book it is mostly postulated to be. The parallels to mainstream conservatism of today are very interesting. Even more intriguing, perhaps, are the parallels to the apologetics of the early church fathers. And yet it is not just the conservative camp that provides points of comparison. Champions of egalitarianism and tolerance have resorted to far-reaching ‘improvements’ of the biblical language in modern translations that try to avoid patriarchalism and prejudice. In Smith’s work one can, as with a magnifying glass, study the mechanisms operative in much apologetic interpretation of the Bible. Most importantly of all, his alterations point to real problems. Some are minor ones, problems only for those who insist on an infallible Bible. Others, however, are major issues for any interpreter, such as the continuity or discontinuity of the ‘salvation history’. Joseph Smith asks genuine questions and perceives genuine problems. Even those who do not accept all his answers would profit from taking his questions seriously.

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Ziesler, *Romans*, 199.

<sup>55</sup> For Luther see Althaus, *Paulus und Luther über den Menschen: Ein Vergleich*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1963).