The Wonder *Is* Scripture

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It's an honor to be associated in any way with this institute, as it's my second-favorite thing named after Elder Neal A. Maxwell. The first is my eldest son, whose middle name was an obvious choice, largely because my wife loves Elder Maxwell even more than she loves me, which might be a problem were it not for the fact that I agree with her. I once spent so much time in this library creating a compilation of Elder Maxwell's talks that by the time I was finished, my wife had called the police to report a missing person. When they suggested that I was probably just hanging out with friends, my wife responded in panic, "He doesn't have any friends!"

Thankfully, then and now, I have a few more friends than my wife gives me credit for. But admittedly, many of them I've never met in person—only on the page. Ours is a bookish bond, but that is anything but a fictional friendship. The friends I've made in scripture, for example, have influenced me as deeply as any living relationship, and it is that *living, relational,* and *transformative* influence that to me constitutes—and even crowns—the *wonder* of scripture. As I'll argue today, without *that* type of wonder, it wouldn't be *scripture* at all.

I'll zoom in on scriptural wonder in a moment, but first, allow me to zoom out on the wonder of reading.

Perhaps like you, I choose books to read based on the worlds I inhabit. Or is it the other way around, my books creating my worlds? Does my to-do list determine my booklist, or is my library card a passport, transporting me to places that no longer feel foreign? Like travel, reading creates reality, and not through instruction but by immersion. I ranged

across Middle Earth long before meeting Tolkien; I entered Narnia through the wardrobe, not Lewis's life or letters. Even having grown up in the Church, with bishops to guide me through all of life's stages, one of the priesthood's profoundest impressions came from a bishop I borrowed from Jean Valjean, who called me to conduct a one-man neighborhood food drive my sophomore year of college just by stuffing silver candlesticks into a convict's bulging sack.

Knowing my love of literature, my well-read eldest daughter gave me a book for Christmas, and knowing my love-hate relationship with the comic iconoclasm of Mark Twain, she chose one that could not have been written without him. The book is called *James,* written by Percival Everett, and the titular character is none other than Jim, the escaped slave that Huckleberry Finn is not "Christian" enough to turn in. In Everett's imaginative rendering, Twain's Jim is both well-read and well-spoken but is careful to sound uneducated because he is smart enough to know that "the better [Whites] feel, the safer [Blacks] are."[1] As he explains to his equally intelligent children, "White folks expect us to sound a certain way and it can only help if we don't disappoint them."[2] Self-effacement would be key to self-preservation.

Far more than "Jim" the slave, "James" was in fact a master, at least of the linguistic art he was teaching to his children. His term for it is fascinating—"situational translation"[3]—the act of translating inner thoughts into an outer vocabulary that reflects the rhetorical situation in which a speaker finds himself. In terms of the racism that defined James's social position, this meant reducing elevated expression to the lower level of a culturally constructed slave-speak that was more in keeping with the assumptions—indeed, the enforceable expectations—of Jim's supposed superiors.

Situational translation is new to people familiar with Jim's antebellum America, but the concept should not be new to students of the scriptures. For those familiar with the principle of divine accommodation, "situational translation" includes God's willingness to speak "after the manner of [our] language" instead of his, an act of condescension in which he stoops to the level of weak "servants . . . that they might come to understanding" (D&C 1:24; see also 2 Ne. 31:3).

Yet there is more to this than placing heavenly "treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor. 4:7), as the Incarnation of Christ would suggest. As we are

1. Percival Everett, *James* (Knopf Doubleday, 2024), 23.
2. Everett, *James,* 21.
3. Everett, *James,* 22.

learning from deeper digs into Joseph Smith's miraculous processes of scriptural production, "translation" has more meanings than one. Yes, it can mean "to render into another language" (the sixth of seven definitions in Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary*), but far higher on Webster's list is translation's ability "to bear, carry or remove from one place to another" (his first definition), or more specifically, its power "to remove or convey to heaven, as a human being, without death" (his second definition).[4] This is the sense we use when we speak of "translated" beings, and it is in this sense that I want to wrestle with the concept of "situational translation." As I see it, the concept not only captures what God is doing when he *gives* us scripture but also tells us what we must do to fully *receive* it.

In the case of James the slave, situational translation was a rerendering of words, but in the case of *James* the novel, it was a repositioning of people. Everett imaginatively entered a world first created by Mark Twain, and he invites his readers to do likewise. We are brought into the lived experience of Huck Finn and his old friend Jim, who we finally see as a very different "James." In other words, we are "translated" (or moved) into their "situation."

What's more, such situational translation allows for an act of situational creation as well. In Everett's case, once he'd been translated into Twain's created world, he could continue Twain's creative act, making for Jim a world in which a slave could utter his own Magnificat. Even more importantly, this creation-born-of-translation not only changed life retroactively along the nineteenth-century Mississippi but also has the potential to affect life proactively in the racially charged situations of our day. How might recent history have been different if we looked at people like Trayvon Martin, Ahmaud Arbery, or the Black worshippers at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church not as two-dimensional Jims but each as a James worthy of profound recognition?

Everett's creative acts of situational translation are truly moving—emotionally, yes, but also temporospatially. He moves us to another time and place in hopes of changing us before we head back to the present. Without that change, no real translation has occurred; we haven't occupied that world long enough or deep enough to want to change our own. For that to happen, we'll need to feel the throbbing in our own leg when James is suffering from the snake bite. We'll need to spend a few sleepless nights worrying about our own children still in chains. Somehow—imaginatively, emotionally, vicariously—I'll have to look down at my soft,

4. American Dictionary of the English Language, Webster's Dictionary 1828, under "translate," https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/translate.

white hands and see the black, calloused hands of James, my twin brother. That is reading a book. That is allowing the words to be made flesh.

Or perhaps you didn't know that I was here to talk about scripture! As John begins his Gospel, so we begin our understanding of how to study it—with the Word that awaits us "in the beginning" of any spiritual endeavor, a Word that lets us be "with God" and makes us more like God (John 1:1). To do all that, the Word (as in Jesus) had to be "made flesh, and dwel[l] among us" (v. 14), or in our case, we have to "dwell" in the word (as in scripture) and imprint it on our living flesh. We must wrap ourselves in scripture the way Jesus "wrap[ped] our injured flesh around" his perfect premortal spirit.[5] We must clothe ourselves in the canon, an endowment of power from every page. This would be situational translation of the highest order, and by being translated into the word of God, we can translate that word into our world. In short, we can open the book, enter the page, and come back different.

But before we try that here, let's take the idea of situational translation from Percival Everett and add to it a concept from Kenneth Burke, one of the leading lights of mid-twentieth-century rhetorical studies. Unlike his peers reaching as far back as Aristotle, Burke defined rhetoric less as persuasion and more as identification, which he felt was a better term for what rhetorical acts are trying to accomplish. Coming from a French and Latin term that means "to advise" (*suadere*) "through" (*per*) to completion, to persuade is to successfully induce someone to agree with you, typically by appealing to reason.[6] To identify, meanwhile, suggests not just one's sense of identity but one that is essentially identical to that of someone else. Sameness and oneness are inherent in the term; in the mid-seventeenth century, "identification" involved "treating [one] thing as the same as another" and by the mid-nineteenth century, it had taken on the psychological sense of "becoming or feeling oneself one with another."[7]

That unified sense of self is what Burke held to be the aim of rhetoric—a convincing and converting that emphasizes the *con* (the "with") at the heart of true agreement. A motivating connection occurs between speaker and hearer in which they find common ground, or ideally, a common identity. Seen in this way, rhetoric is not as unidirectional and propositional as mere persuasion might imply. Rather, it is

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5. "Welcome to Our World," by Chris Rice, track 4 on *Deep Enough to Dream,* Rocketown Records released on June 3, 1997.

6. *Oxford English Dictionary,* under "rhetoric (noun[1])," senses 1.a, 4.a, accessed February 10, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1485006821.

7. *Online Etymology Dictionary,* under "persuasion (n.)," updated April 15, 2020, https://www.etymonline.com/word/persuasion.

cooperative and relational, emotive and empathetic, and deeply experiential throughout. A phrase that Burke uses to capture this oneness of rhetorical identification is of particular interest to us here: he calls it "a doctrine of consubstantiality."[8]

The theological resonance of this term is unavoidable. Invoked in Trinitarian contexts to describe the oneness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, consubstantiality denotes an identity of substance despite a difference of aspect, a Three that is essentially One. In rhetorical terms, Burke invokes a similar sense of shared-identity-that-outweighs-difference, this time between speaker and hearer, between writer and reader. "A way of life is an *acting-together,*" Burke argues, "and in acting together, men [and women] have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, [and] attitudes that make them *consubstantial.*"[9] Jesus said it far more simply: "Be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine" (D&C 38:27). Even when he spoke of "persuasion," he couched it in terms that we identify with the character of Christ (and thus want to identify with ourselves): long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, and love unfeigned (see D&C 121:41). Under such influence, I'm not persuaded against my will; rather, my will is "swallowed up" (Mosiah 15:7) in the will of one with whom I instinctively wish to identify.

This level of identification—with God and with others—is what situational translation hopes to accomplish, and what scripture is meant to engender. No wonder Jesus taught in parables! Stories draw us in, presenting us with characters with whom we identify. We are translated into situations that alter our reality and inspire us to alter the reality to which we return. Scripture is an open door to substitutionary experience, to vicarious encounter, to identification with God and neighbor. It is consubstantiality made possible by words made living flesh. "Go, and do thou likewise" (Luke 10:37) is its standing invitation to all who identify with its words.

So what of the "wonder of scripture"? Hopefully the threads of my argument are starting to knit instead of fray. Ask yourself: first, is my experience in scripture an act of situational translation? Am I transported into the text and changed by my time there? Second, do I sense my own consubstantiality with the people I meet within scripture? Do I identify with them in ways that help me identify with God?

This might help explain the reliance of Nephi (Mr. "I Glory in Plainness") on the writings of Isaiah (Mr. "I Glory in Something Else"). In some ways, their rhetorical construction couldn't be more different; yet

8. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (University of California Press, 1969), 21, emphasis original.

9. Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives,* 21.

their rhetorical identification made them consubstantial in wonderful ways. Nephi's "soul delighte[d] in [Isaiah's] words," precisely because those words mirrored Nephi's other soul-deep delights: "the covenants of the Lord," his "grace, . . . justice, . . . power, and mercy," the "truth of the coming of Christ" (2 Ne. 11:2, 4–5). Introducing his longest insertion of Isaiah, Nephi uses words like "prove," "proveth," and "proving" four times to describe why he is calling Isaiah to the witness stand (2 Ne. 11:3–4, 6). Yet it was not the "proof" of empirical persuasion that Isaiah supplied. Rather, it was the pull of spiritual identification, made possible through imagery and symbol that was emotionally evocative and rhetorically resonant. As Nephi affirmed in his first invocation of Isaiah, Mr. Prose was enlisting Mr. Poetry to "more fully persuade [us] to believe in the Lord [our] Redeemer." And this would happen not simply by reading Isaiah's words, but rather by likening them—a term Nephi and Jacob use repeatedly when drawing on Isaiah's rhetorical gifts (see 1 Ne. 19:23, 24; 2 Ne. 6:5; 11:2, 8; for "likening" with Zenos and Jacob, see Jacob 5:3 and 6:1; for Jesus "likening," see 3 Ne. 14:24, 26). Again, mere reading would be woefully inadequate; with scripture, we must enter into its imagery and identify with its transformative intent. We must learn to liken if scripture is ever to "be for our profit and learning" (1 Ne. 19:23). Only then, wrote Nephi, can we truly "have hope" (1 Ne. 19:24), "lift up [our] hearts and rejoice for all men" (2 Ne. 11:8).

That seems to be what scripture is for, when stated in most practical terms: joy for the journey, no matter how daunting the path. Depending on the chosen metaphor, scripture is manna: the sweet and satisfying daily bread that nourishes us through our wilderness wanderings. It is the Liahona: an object of "curious workmanship" that guides us to "the more fertile parts" of our path (1 Ne. 16:16). Scripture is thus both direction and provision, pointing us homeward and sustaining us until we arrive. To repeat the pairing with Lehi's help, although scripture is the iron rod that leads to the tree of life, it is inseparable from the tree of life itself and the incomparable fruit we feast on once we get there.

Consider Nephi's visionary rendering, in which the tree is "the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men" (1 Ne. 11:22). The language of "shedding abroad" suggests a scattering of the tree's healing leaves, a generous distribution of its incomparable fruit, or in keeping with Nephi's prophetic vision, an extension of its beckoning branches. After all, as Nephi saw it, while the iron rod did lead to the tree from the perspective of those at a distance (see 1 Ne. 11:25), it originally extended out from the tree, as exemplified in the ministry of Jesus. When envisioning Christ's condescension, Nephi sees "the Son of God

going forth among the children of men" (v. 24, emphasis added)—the tree reaching out all around it. Similarly, Nephi then sees that "the Lamb of God *went forth*" to be baptized (v. 27, emphasis added), and then "*went forth* [again] ministering unto the people" (v. 28, emphasis added). He later saw "the Lamb of God *going forth* among the children of men" yet again, healing the sick, casting out devils, comforting all "who were afflicted" (v. 31, emphasis added).

Looking further into the future, Nephi similarly sees "a book" that is "carried forth" among the Gentiles (1 Ne. 13:20), one that "proceeded forth" from the Jews to spread "the fulness of the gospel of the Lord" (v. 24). Fifteen times in that portion of his vision Nephi promises the extension of God's word into the world: it is "carried forth" (v. 20), it "proceed[s] forth" (v. 24, 38), it will "go forth" (v. 25, 26, 28, 29), God will "bring [it] forth" (v. 34), it will "come forth" (v. 35, 38, 39) with the help of those who "seek to bring forth my Zion at that day" (v. 37).

Emphatically, Nephi is seeing that through Christ's mortal ministry, and through the scriptures that contain his living word, the love of God would go forth into a world in desperate need of it. The tree of life would extend in every direction—book-like branches, twig-like texts—reaching out like rods of iron as far as the eye could see. The canon as a canopy under which all can find shelter. As the book of Proverbs says of the wisdom found in God's word, "She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her" (Prov. 3:18). When we "lay hold" of the iron rod, we take the outstretched hand of God.

That is "situational translation" into the all-encompassing love of God. That is "rhetorical identification" with the One who reaches out to us with His word. Again, that is the "wonder of scripture." And without that wonder, it isn't really scripture—at least not to us.

That last point is key, and to make it, I'll need the help of another writer. Alongside Percival Everett and Kenneth Burke, allow me to introduce you to Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Part Presbyterian minister, part Harvard Islamicist, Smith attempted to give scripture something no one knew it needed: a definition. As he observed, "On close inquiry, it emerges that being scripture is not a quality inherent in a given text, or type of text, so much as an interactive relation between that text and a community of persons. . . . 'Scripture' is a bilateral term. . . . It inherently implies, in fact names, a relationship."[10] This relationship is one of speaker and hearer, of writer and reader, or reader and person being read. Ultimately, it is Giver

10. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Fortress Press, 1993; 2005), ix, 17.

and receiver, and without both parties participating—identifying—the relationship ceases to exist. *Scripture* ceases to exist.

Thus, what is sacred scripture to one group is to others mere myth or tall tale, ancient literature at best and the stuff of Broadway musicals at worst. Skeptics take all the world's religions and discard their texts as disparate delusions, blind to what Huston Smith called "the winnowed wisdom of the human race."[11] We must do otherwise, continuing to infuse meaning into the scriptures by infusing the scriptures into our lives. We can do as Alma commanded Helaman, and "keep all these things sacred" (Alma 37:2), which is not the same as merely keeping all these sacred things. In the latter construction, the sacredness is inherent in the things, but in Alma's phrase, the sacredness was maintained by the keepers. Keepers do all within their power to help the scriptures "retain their brightness" (v. 5), even "small and simple things" that others might consider "foolish" (v. 6). As Smith put it, "People—a given community—make a text into scripture, or keep it scripture: by treating it in a certain way."[12]

I want to speak more about that way of treating scripture in a moment, but first, allow me to speak more personally about Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Almost singlehandedly, he changed the trajectory of my own approach to scripture when I stumbled across an article he had written a few years before I was born. In reading it during graduate school, I was born again, at least as a student of scripture, for it identified—and I identified with—a perspective on scripture that I had long felt personally but had never seen expressed academically. Titled "The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible,"[13] it helped turn the library at the Vanderbilt Divinity School into an academic Waters of Mormon, for there I came to a knowledge of the type of scriptorian God wanted me to be. Without me even asking it to, it validated the past and outlined the future of my personal, pastoral, and professional study of the scriptures. Not bad for nine and a half pages.

The article begins by describing the kind of religion department that Smith considered worthy of the name, picturing a particular type of course that "would be concerned with the Bible as scripture."[14] Such a suggestion seems unnecessary at first: of course a religion department would study the Bible. But it is the last two words—as scripture—that demand our attention, for approaching the Bible in that way would

11. Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (Harper San Francisco, 1991), 5.

12. Smith, *What Is Scripture?,* 18.

13. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, no. 2 (1971): 131–40.

14. Smith, "Study of Religion," 132.

indeed affect the course's content. What is it about the Bible that makes it scripture rather than some other type of ancient literature? What brings it into the homes of millions when most texts from that time interest only scholars or museum goers? Rather than historical artifact, what makes it "a living force in the life of the Church"?[15]

To answer these questions—or more accurately to emphasize them—Smith turned to the Qur'an, one of his specialties, but did so to draw attention to the Bible, which he feared was being pigeonholed in academic circles; the Bible was studied deeply to be sure, but not as broadly as it deserved if it were truly seen as scripture. To summarize his argument, he wondered why Qur'anic studies seemed to focus almost exclusively on seventh-century Arabia, when the book was just as important in fifteenth-century Spain or twentieth-century Indonesia. "The attempt to understand the Qur'an," he wrote, "is to understand how it has fired the imagination, and inspired the poetry, and formulated the inhibitions, and guided the ecstasies, and teased the intellects, . . . and nurtured the piety, of hundreds of millions of people in widely diverse climes and over a series of radically divergent centuries."[16]

Drawing the parallel, Smith then turned to the Bible, through which people "have found not merely ancient history but present salvation, not merely Jesus but Christ, not merely literature but God, [as] millions attest."[17] Consequently, biblical studies must not confine itself to post-exilic Palestine or the first-century Mediterranean world. The Bible was just as important in Luther's sixteenth-century Germany or the nineteenth-century America of Joseph Smith.

What concerned the later Smith (Wilfred Cantwell) was how the Bible was studied, which tended to end too early or begin too late, bracketing out the stage when the book was actual scripture. As he later wrote, historical criticism explores the Bible's "pre-scriptural phase," and literary criticism focuses on the "post-scriptural phase" that emerged in a secular post-Enlightenment. But "the texts' role in human life as scripture—rich, complex, and powerful . . . —was during the long centuries in between. Furthermore," he added, "it is not yet over."[18]

For Smith, the Bible's real life was its afterlife (a fitting concept considering its contents!)—the life it began leading after it came to be seen as scripture. In Smith's view, as important as it is to study what went into

15. Smith, "Study of Religion," 133.
16. Smith, "Study of Religion," 133.
17. Smith, "Study of Religion," 139.
18. Smith, *What Is Scripture?,* 4.

the Bible, it is just as important to explore what came out of it. As Smith passionately urged, "By all means let us . . . know how it became; but let us study further how and what it went on becoming."[19]

What Smith's article did for me was offer a choice as to what kind of scriptural scholar I could become. Some study the world that created the Bible; others study the worlds the Bible creates.

Smith's article delineated the three worlds of scripture and called attention—and needed commendation—to the oft-neglected third. The three worlds of scripture are the world behind the text, the world within (or of) the text, and the world in front of the text. The first deals with all that went into the Bible's creation—its preexistence, so to speak. The second focuses on the text itself, exploring its structure, symbolism, and style. The third encompasses the ongoing influence of scripture, how it has been interpreted by subsequent generations, and yes, how it has inspired them.

These three worlds can be distinguished in other ways as well. Whereas the first is author and editor focused, the second is text-based, and the third revolves around the reader. The first is approached historically and culturally, the second textually and literarily, the third theologically and homiletically. In terms of biblical criticism's subcategories, the first world relies on source, form, redaction, and historical; the second world employs literary, genre, textual, and rhetorical; the third is home to canonical criticism, reader reception history, theological interpretation, and the history of hermeneutics.

Admittedly, such compartmentalization minimizes the overlap and interplay between these three worlds, so flexibility is needed throughout, and not just flexibility, but synergy. This is the final point I wish to make, so let me state it clearly.

For the academic study of scripture to honor its subject *as scripture,* these three separate worlds must undergo a planetary alignment, and it is the third world, not the first, that must set the course. Were it not scripture, this ordering would not be necessary: as an artifact, the Bible as history would be adequate; as a textual object, the Bible as literature would be ideal; but as a "contemporary agent" and "activating symbol" (Wilfred Cantwell Smith's words),[20] the Bible as scripture must be the perspective of choice. Yes, it must take into full consideration its historical formation and its literary construction, but "with an eye single" (D&C 4:5) to its ongoing influence in the world. The moment our eye loses sight of that is the moment we cease seeing scripture.

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19. Smith, "Study of Religion," 135.
20. Smith, "Study of Religion," 134.

I may have just opened a can of worms I won't have time today to clean up, but before I'm run out of town on a rail by my historical and literary superiors, allow me to say what I emphatically am not saying. I am not saying that the first and second worlds of scripture are unnecessary or inferior. Rather, I am saying they are foundational, but only as forerunners, voices in the wilderness crying, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord" (Mark 1:3). They are signposts, not final destinations, and unless they help people progress in their journey to the tree of life, they are no longer rods of iron but something else entirely.

Jesus seems to have had something like this in mind when he told the self-styled scriptorians of his day that they "search[ed] the scriptures" as if they were source instead of signpost. "In them ye think ye have eternal life," he chided, but "they are they which testify of me" (John 5:39). Nephi understood this and never confused his scriptural means with Christ's salvific ends. "Hearken unto these words," he said, noting the importance of scripture, but "believe in Christ," emphasizing the purpose for which he had written them. He even added, "and if ye believe not in these words, believe in Christ," showing he clearly understood the difference (2 Ne. 33:10).

Do scripture scholars understand that today? Or do we sometimes act like "scribes" that prize pages over people? Do we research "mint and anise and cummin" while "omit[ing] the weightier matters"—"judgment, mercy, and faith"—that bless living people? Again, I am not trying to minimize the first and second worlds of scripture—far from it—but I am yoking them to a holier aim. To conclude the verse about "weightier matters," the third world of scripture "ought [we] to have [studied], and not to leave the other[s] un[studied]" (Matt. 23:23).

Speaking of scribes, in one of the few passages in which Jesus says something positive about them, he envisioned a scribe who was "instructed unto the kingdom of heaven" and compared him to "a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old." Notice the scribe's orientation, not solely looking down at the text before him, or back at whence it came. Rather, he seems to be looking forward, having been directed "unto the kingdom of heaven." With that intention informing his scribal duties, of course the treasures he discovered would be both "new and old." The old things would likely be deepened exegesis, but the new things would put those insights to work, producing novel applications and relevant likenings that would be helpful to those who similarly need to be "instructed unto the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 13:52).

The Book of Mormon's final scribe, Moroni, put the matter starkly when he compared "the record" to "the plates." Obviously, both were related, with the record impossible without the plates and the plates

empty without the record. But Moroni clearly saw the hierarchy within this synergy: "the plates thereof are of no worth," he said hyperbolically, "but the record thereof is of great worth" (Morm. 8:14) because of what it would do for its readers. The plates provided necessary means; the record would accomplish ultimate ends.

Seeing this distinction would have come naturally to Moroni, because despite his presence in the past (the world behind the text), he clearly saw our present (the world in front of the text) and spoke directly to us (the world within the text). "I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not" (Morm. 8:35). Though Moroni (and his father Mormon) broke the fourth wall more explicitly than most, they were not alone in aligning the three textual worlds with the third one determining their aim. Malachi was "one of the [ancient] prophets, who had his eye fixed on" the latter-day work (D&C 128:17). Others "died . . . [before] receiv[ing] the promises, but [saw] them afar off" (Heb. 11:13). Jesus told his New Testament Apostles "that many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them" (Matt. 13:17), and he could say the same to each of us today.

In relation to the first and second worlds of scripture, the third has "not come to destroy, but to fulfil" (Matt. 5:17). It is present, the others are past. It is purpose, the others are process. It is helm, the others are anchor and sail. None should be emphasized in isolation; instead, contraries should be proved so that truth can be made manifest.[21] Just as scripture cannot survive as scripture without a continuing community to maintain its "brightness," neither can it survive without being firmly rooted in the soil that gave it birth. Scripture must be a tree with both roots and branches, ancient fathers and latter-day children reciprocally turning hearts (see Mal. 4:1–6). Eisegesis without exegesis is largely unfounded; but antiquarianism without application is largely irrelevant.

So keep them both; learn to be ambidextrous; train to play both ways. Or at the very least, link arms (and approaches) with other experts, which is something the Maxwell Institute and the BYU Religion faculty do beautifully. Depth perception will come by combining both perspectives. Real study and true Spirit must be one in our hand.

Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery learned this while translating the Book of Mormon, a record that bridges past and future if ever there

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21. "Letter to Israel Daniel Rupp, 5 June 1844," in Brett D. Dowdle, Adam H. Petty, J. Chase Kirkham, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, David W. Grua, and Matthew C. Godfrey, eds., *Documents, Volume 15: 16 May–28 June 1844,* Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2023), 128–29.

was one. Having studied ancient texts that spoke of baptism, they then turned to the Lord for current application, and they received it. What's more, they received priesthood ordination and baptismal ordinance, and with a Spirit they had not felt before, they "prophesied many things which should shortly come to pass" (JS–H 1:73)—past informing present, inspiring future. With that, they then reversed direction, returning to the ancient world but with newfound eyes to see. And what did they see? "Our minds being now enlightened, we began to have the scriptures laid open to our understandings, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed unto us in a manner which we never could attain to previously, nor ever before had thought of" (v. 74). By "meaning and intention," we once again prove contraries. Meaning is set by the writer; intention is embodied in the reader. Meaning is exegesis; intention is application. Meaning is found through critical analysis; intention tells me what to do as a result.

And what are we to do? Channeling the spiritual pragmatism that I learned from William James but brought with me at birth, I say we serve, extending rods of iron—and thus trees of life—in every direction. We theologize with Paul and Peter, but then, like them, we preach and bless and heal. With Moses we plunder the riches of Egypt to later make tabernacle furnishings, excavating antiquities but putting them to their holiest use. Like the writer of Hebrews, we study to become intimately acquainted with every raindrop in our scriptural "cloud of witnesses," but then we let that living water pour, until it washes away "every weight" (Heb. 12:1).

With that, let me end where we began—with wonder. Not the superficial wonder of curiosity (though that matters), nor the academic wonder of discovery (though that too has its place). Rather, I speak of the transformative wonder that occurs when we allow ourselves to be translated into scripture's sacred space, identify deeply with those we meet there, and return changed to a world in need of changing.

This is the wonder that seized Mosiah's people as they "beheld those that had been delivered out of bondage" (Mosiah 25:16). It's the wonder that moved Alma to rewrite his life story after encountering Abinadi's words. It's the wonder that caused Joseph and Oliver to see the scriptures "laid open" in unimaginable ways. In each case, the wonder arose not from historical excavation or literary analysis alone—though both proved essential—but from the living encounter with scripture as scripture.

When we enter scripture's three worlds properly aligned—grounded in history, attentive to text, but oriented toward application and transformation—we extend what Wilfred Cantwell Smith called scripture's

"incredible ongoing career."[22] The past comes to life not as artifact but as invitation. The text opens not as literature but as lifeline. And our present circumstances shine with new possibility as we recognize, in James's terms, the need for situational translation in our own time. How might we draw warring partners toward the Prince of Peace? How can we, like Nephi, liken ancient wisdom to present need? How shall we, like Mormon and Moroni, write and teach for future generations that we can see only through the eye of faith?

The answers lie not in choosing between scripture's worlds but in connecting them. We must be as comfortable with archaeology as application, as fluent in historical criticism as in homiletical creativity. But we must never forget that the purpose of our study is not merely to understand ancient texts but to be transformed by living scripture—and then to help transform the world.

With this call—and calling—in mind, I invite us all to become not just readers of scripture but inhabitants of its worlds and keepers of its gardens. May our study be deep but never divorced from purpose. May our analysis be rigorous but always oriented toward renewal. Above all, may our engagement with scripture be wonder-full—full of the wonder that comes when heaven touches earth through sacred text, when ancient words become living flesh, when we find ourselves translated into holy ground and return bearing fruit from the tree of life.

For in the end, that is the wonder of scripture—not that it exists, but that it persists. Not that it was written, but that it continues to write itself upon human hearts. Not that it was, but that it ever shall be, as long as we approach it as scripture, embrace it as scripture, and allow its transformative power to work in us and through us the wonders that God still has in store.

May we be saints and scholars who keep scripture sacred by treating it so, who help it "retain its brightness" by polishing it with practice. For the wonder *is* scripture, and we are its witnesses.

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22. Smith, "Study of Religion," 133.