

Afterwords

Editor:

Reading Robert L. Millet's article "Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism" in the summer 1989 issue reminded me of a story I heard some time ago. Jim met Bill in a grocery store. "Say, Bill," he said, "I just heard the good news about your winning a hundred thousand dollars." "Thanks," said Bill, "but actually it wasn't me. It was my brother. And he didn't win it; he lost it." Like Bill, I am always gratified to have someone take an interest in my work,¹ but it would be even more pleasant to find that he got the story right.

In taking issue with the point of view that Mormon doctrine before 1835 was quite close to that of contemporary Protestant Arminianism, Millet just didn't get the story straight. To begin with, although Millet and I may disagree on our interpretations of the message of the Book of Mormon on the nature of the Godhead, if I understand his point of view correctly we do *not* differ on our interpretation of the relationship between the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's thought.

Beginning with the second full paragraph on page 51, Millet goes to great lengths to argue against a point of view that Blake Ostler explicated seven years after my article was published. He seems to assume that I share Ostler's views. But although I find Ostler's interpretation quite interesting, it has not convinced me. Millet begins his argument by saying, "To suggest that the Book of Mormon reflects Joseph Smith's 'early thought' is to place the Nephite record within the developmental process of

Joseph Smith and the Saints." Then he proceeds to argue that for Joseph Smith to have placed his own ideas in the Book of Mormon would be "tantamount to deceit and misrepresentation: it is to claim that the doctrines and principles are of ancient date (as the record itself declares), when, in fact, they are a fabrication (albeit an 'inspired' fabrication) of a nineteenth-century man. We have every reason to believe that the Book of Mormon came *through* Joseph Smith, not *from* him."

Moving from the first assumption, Millet proceeds, "Presumably those who believe the Book of Mormon presents a trinitarian concept of God assume that the book reflects the prevailing sentiments of the nineteenth century concerning God." It is not for me to say whether Millet's characterization of Ostler's views is accurate, but his argument is quite misplaced as applied to my article.

In fact, I believe the Book of Mormon is an ancient text and that the doctrines explicated in the book are doctrines believed by the Nephites and other ancient peoples whose record the book contains. Instead of assuming that the Book of Mormon reflects Joseph Smith's early thought as Millet evidently supposes, I assume that Joseph Smith's early thought reflected the things he had learned from the Book of Mormon. Presumably since Joseph Smith believed the Book of Mormon to be the word of God, he also believed the doctrines that the book preached at the time he translated it from the Nephite language. That those teachings were similar to those of some

nineteenth-century Arminian-based Protestant groups such as the Methodists and Disciples, I find interesting. I used those groups' doctrines for comparative purposes in my article and suggested that the similarity may have helped in attracting some early converts to Mormonism. However, that does not mean that the Book of Mormon doctrines were drawn from contemporary Protestantism, only that they were similar.

Later revelations by God to Joseph Smith, particularly section 130 of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, showed that the Saints were wrong in some of their early beliefs. As a result, they preached different doctrines, and we now know that God and Jesus Christ have bodies and that the Holy Ghost is a personage of spirit.

Clearly Millet and I read both the Book of Mormon and the *Lectures on Faith* quite differently. I would be interested to see his construction of Abinadi's message to King Noah in *Mosiah* chapter 15, or Ammon's message to King Lamoni in *Alma* chapter 18. I assume he would produce the same sort of argument he does on the Fifth Lecture on Faith. But these differences have absolutely nothing to do with my views of the Book of Mormon or of the relationship between Joseph Smith's thought and the book.

The academic life of Brigham Young University, and indeed of any major university, depends on open and vigorous scholarly discourse. *BYU Studies* and other scholarly publications ought to publish all sides of questions dealing with the Mormon past. Moreover, all scholars should expect to see their positions contradicted—vigorously contradicted—by those who disagree. That is part of what the academy is about.

There is, however, a line that we should not overstep in our disagreement since it separates scholarly argument from personal attack. We cross that line when we either

misattribute or misrepresent the beliefs of a scholar with whom we disagree. Since I have had no previous interaction with Robert Millet on these issues, I assume that in this case the problem is merely misattribution rather than intentional misrepresentation. Nevertheless, to call into question even obliquely a Church member's belief in such basic matters as the historical validity of the Book of Mormon or the authenticity of Joseph Smith's revelations from God is to cast a chill on any scholarly discussion by shifting the ground from legitimate argument to personality or orthodoxy. It is the functional equivalent in the Mormon community of a national discourse in which accusations of Communism or Fascism are leveled at an opponent. Immediately, the person who is the object of the charge must make a choice that no scholar should have to make: a choice between appearing oversensitive by defending himself or herself against an unjust accusation or ignoring the matter and leaving at least some readers to assume that the charge is true. Why will some readers believe the charge? Because an author in whom they have some confidence has made it.

The bottom line is that charges or even hints of heresy or lack of orthodoxy have no place in academic discourse and ought to be excised from any scholarly discussion of the Mormon past.

Thomas G. Alexander
Professor of history
and director of the
Charles Redd Center
for Western Studies,
Brigham Young University

NOTE

¹Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology," *Sunstone* 5 (July-August 1980): 24-33.