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Joseph Smith and the Historicity of the Book of Mormon

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Kent P. Jackson

Latter-day Saints accept the fact that the Book of Mormon is the word of God, brought to light through the Prophet Joseph Smith. Yet some writers claim that while the Book of Mormon is “true,” it is not historical, meaning that the events it describes never took place and the people described in it never existed. But relegating the Book of Mormon to inspired parable or morally uplifting allegory presents serious problems of logic. The book itself announces its historicity repeatedly. Can it really be true in any sense if it consistently misrepresents its origin? Joseph Smith also was consistent in maintaining that the book describes real events and real people. And the voice of God in the Doctrine and Covenants adds the clear and unambiguous witness of the Book of Mormon’s historicity. Can these sources be relied on for anything if they unfailingly misrepresent the nature of the “keystone” of the Latter-day Saint faith? In the end, the Book of Mormon can only be what it claims to be, or it is a delusion or a fraud. History and reason leave no other viable options.

It has been suggested by some, even among members of the Church, that the Book of Mormon is a nineteenth-century book, either written by Joseph Smith or received through revelation, and that it has no basis in any real, ancient, historical events. Some who hold this point of view hasten to add that though the book is not historical, it is nonetheless “the word of God,” “inspired,” and/or “true.”¹ This appears to mean that it qualifies as such while the events that it describes never took place. A variation on the suggestion is that it comes

from God or is otherwise “true” but that it does not matter if the events that are described in it ever happened.²

Typical dictionary definitions of *true* include: “consistent with fact; agreeing with the reality; representing the thing as it is,”³ “actual state of affairs.”⁴ The word *historical* means: “of, relating to, or having the character of history especially as distinguished from myth or legend,” “true to history.”⁵ Similarly, *historicity* is defined as “the quality or state of being historic[al] especially as distinct from the mythological or legendary.”⁶

This paper will not be an attempt to define words. But it will be an effort to examine what the Book of Mormon says about itself, what Joseph Smith said about it, and what the Lord said about it in the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants; and it will attempt to reconcile those statements with the notion that the Book of Mormon does not need to be historical to be the inspired word of God.

Those who argue in favor of the true-but-not-historical thesis sometimes invoke the analogy of good literature or the parables of Jesus. The parables, they would suggest, are nonhistorical literary creations that Jesus used to teach true principles. They would suggest that while the parables are not meant to portray events that actually transpired, they are nonetheless true in the sense that they enlighten us, lift us, educate us, and teach us about life. Like good literature in general, the parables are true because their *message* is true, despite the nonhistorical nature of the events and persons who are mentioned in them.⁷

Using the parables-are-true-but-not-historical model, friendly critics of the Book of Mormon’s historicity argue that it does not matter whether the events and individuals in the Book of Mormon are historical, because the aims of the book are achieved independently of its historicity. In other words, like parables or other good works of literature, the Book of Mormon can teach its true principles even if the events in it never happened.⁸ Thus it can still be the word of God.⁹

In my opinion, Latter-day Saints cannot accept these ideas regarding the Book of Mormon. Its historicity is fundamental to what it is and what it intends to accomplish. A perspective that sees it as unhistorical is, in my view, a rejection not only of it and everything else about it but of much more as well.

To determine whether the Book of Mormon must be historically genuine in order to be the “true” “word of God,” I will examine four sources of potential evidence that may bear on our subject: (1) the internal evidence provided within the Book of Mormon itself, (2) the evidence from the Prophet Joseph Smith, (3) the evidence from the Doctrine and Covenants, and (4) the evidence from the Three and Eight Witnesses. This evidence is not brought forth to prove the truth of the Book of Mormon, because that is something that is unprovable using the tools of scholarship and reasoning. But I believe that it can be demonstrated that the book *cannot* be both unhistorical and true at the same time. That is the objective of this paper.

Evidence from the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon is a thoroughly self-conscious book. Throughout its pages, its authors recorded not only the history of their people and the revelations of their prophets but also the process of the composition of the book. A few examples will suffice:

I [Nephi] have received a commandment of the Lord that I should make these plates, for the special purpose that there should be an account engraven of the ministry of my people.

Upon the other plates should be engraven an account of the reign of the kings, and the wars and contentions of my people; wherefore these plates are for the more part of the ministry; and the other plates are for the more part of the reign of the kings and the wars and contentions of my people.

Wherefore, the Lord hath commanded me to make these plates for a wise purpose in him (1 Ne. 9:3–5).

I, Jarom, do not write more, for the plates are small. But behold, my brethren, ye can go to the other plates of Nephi; for behold, upon them the records of our wars are engraven, according to the writings of the kings, or those which they caused to be written.

And I deliver these plates into the hands of my son Omni, that they may be kept according to the commandments of my fathers (Jarom 1:14–15).

And now, my son Helaman, I [Alma] command you that ye take the records which have been entrusted with me;

And I also command you that ye keep a record of this people, according as I have done, upon the plates of Nephi, and keep all these things sacred which I have kept, even as I have kept them; for it is for a wise purpose that they are kept (Alma 37:1–2).

These are representative samples of dozens of such passages. The nouns *record* and *records* are used in almost one hundred verses with respect to the Book of Mormon itself and the documents that went into it.¹⁰ The word *plates* is used almost one hundred times with respect to the Book of Mormon and the plates that went into it.¹¹ The words *write* and *writing* are used in over one hundred fifty verses, all having to do with the writing of the Book of Mormon record.¹² Other words, such as *book*,¹³ *account*,¹⁴ and *engravings*¹⁵ appear in dozens of places in the book, all chronicling the writing of the records that became the Book of Mormon. Following is a list of passages in which the Book of Mormon refers to itself, the process of its creation, or the writings that comprise it.

1 Ne. 1:1–3, 16–17; 6:1, 3–6; 8:30; 9:1–5; 10:1, 15; 13:35–36; 14:25, 28, 30; 17:6; 19:1–6, 18
2 Ne. 3:12, 18–19, 23; 4:14–15, 25; 5:4, 12, 29–33; 11:1–3; 25:1, 3, 6, 8, 21–23, 26; 26:15, 17; 27:6–26, 29; 28:2; 29:10, 12–13; 30:3; 31:1–2; 33:1, 3–5, 11
Jacob 1:1–4; 3:13–14; 4:1–4; 7:26–27
Enos 1:13–16, 23
Jarom 1:1–2, 14–15
Omni 1:1, 3–4, 8–9, 11, 14, 18, 25, 30
W of M 1:1–6, 9–11
Mosiah 1:6, 8, 16; 8:1, 12–13, 19; 12:8; 17:4; 21:27–28, 35; 28:9, 11, 17–20
Alma 3:12; 5:2; 8:1; 9:34; 11:46; 13:31; 18:36, 38; 22:1, 35; 23:5; 28:8–9; 35:13, 16; 37:1–2, 8–9, 21; 43:3; 44:24; 45:2; 47:1; 50:38; 63:17
Hel. 2:13–14; 3:13–17; 8:3; 14:1; 16:25
3 Ne. 1:2–3; 2:9; 5:8–11, 14–19; 7:17; 8:1; 10:19; 16:4; 17:15–17, 25; 18:37; 19:32, 34; 23:4, 6–8, 11–14; 24:1; 26:6–8, 11–12, 18; 27:23–26; 28:18, 25; 30:1
4 Ne. 1:19, 21, 47–49
Morm. 1:1–4; 2:17–18; 3:17–20; 4:23; 5:9, 12; 6:1, 6; 7:8–9; 8:1, 3–5, 12, 14, 23; 9:31–35
Ether 1:1–6; 2:12–13; 3:17, 22–24, 27; 4:1, 3–5, 17; 5:1–2; 6:1; 8:20, 26; 9:1; 12:20, 23–25, 40; 13:1, 13–14; 15:11, 33–34
Moro. 1:1, 4; 7:1; 9:7, 24; 10:1–2, 27, 29

I know of no book that discusses itself so much and so thoroughly. The authors wrote about the smallness of their plates, the difficulty of engraving in metal, their primary sources in other books, and, more than anything else, the messages that they wanted their distant readers to learn from what they recorded.

This information is very important for our discussion of the historicity of the Book of Mormon. The book presents itself so completely as an actual historical record written in ancient times that in my view there can be only two options for evaluating its claims:

Option 1. It is a fraud.

Option 2. It is a genuine ancient book.

The Book of Mormon does not present itself as a historical novel, nor does it intend to be viewed as such. The parables of Jesus, on the other hand, do not make claims about their historicity. But the Book of Mormon repeatedly makes bold and certain claims that it is an ancient book, and those claims are central to its message and its intent.

Evidence from Joseph Smith

Since Joseph Smith was the publisher of the Book of Mormon, we can rightly assign some measure of credit for its existence to him, assuming that he was not entirely subject to some force independent of his own agency. It will not be necessary to repeat the whole story of Moroni's coming, the plates, and the Book of Mormon, but we will view some selections of Joseph Smith's public and private statements about its origin and content.¹⁶

1832 draft history

When I was seventeen years of age, I called again upon the Lord, and he showed unto me a heavenly vision. For behold, an angel of the Lord came and stood before me, and it was by night. . . . And he revealed unto me that . . . there were plates of gold upon which there were engravings which were engraven by Moroni and his fathers, the servants of the living God in ancient days, and deposited by the commandments of God. . . . I immediately went to the place and found where the plates were deposited, as the angel of the Lord had commanded me, and straightway made three attempts to get them. And then, being exceedingly frightened, I supposed it had been a dream of vision, but when I considered, I knew that it was not. . . . The angel appeared unto me again and said unto me, "You . . . cannot now obtain them, for the time is not yet fulfilled. . . . In [God's] own due time thou shalt obtain them." For now I had been tempted of the Adversary and sought the plates to obtain riches, and kept not the commandment that I should have an eye single to the glory of God. Therefore I was chastened and sought diligently to obtain the plates, and obtained them not until I was twenty-one years of age.¹⁷

Note the deliberate historical detail in the account: the Prophet's age at the time of the angel's first visit, time of day, metal of plates, who engraved them and when, physical attempts to obtain them, certainty that it was not a dream, temptation to profit from the plates, and age when Joseph Smith finally obtained them.

Letter to a newspaper, January 1833

The Book of Mormon is a record of the forefathers of our western tribes of Indians, having been found through the ministration of an holy angel [and] translated into our own language by the gift and power of God after having been hid up in the earth for the last fourteen hundred years; containing the word of God which was delivered unto them. By it we learn that our western tribes of Indians are descendants from that Joseph that was sold into Egypt, and that the land of America is a promised land unto them.¹⁸

Some historical details: book written by ancestors of Indians, translated into English, duration of plates' burial in ground, Israelite ancestry of Indians.

Letter to Emma Smith, June 1834 (describing the countryside in Missouri)

The whole of our journey, in the midst of so large a company of social, honest, and sincere men, wandering over the plains of the Nephites, recounting occasionally the history of the Book of Mormon, roving over the mounds of that once beloved people of the Lord.¹⁹

Journal entry, November 1835

When I was about seventeen years old, I saw another vision of angels. In the night season after I had retired to bed, I had not been asleep but was meditating upon my past life and experience. . . . An angel appeared before me. His hands and feet were naked, pure and white, and he stood between the floors of the room, clothed with purity inexpressible. He told me of a sacred record which was written on plates of gold. I saw in the vision the place where they were deposited. He said the Indians were the literal descendants of Abraham. . . . also that the Urim and Thummim was hid up with the record, and that God would give me power to translate it with the assistance of this instrument. . . . After the vision had all passed, I found that it was nearly daylight. . . . I went and found the place where the plates were, according to the direction of the angel. [I] also saw them, and the angel as before. . . . The angel told me . . . to come again in one year from that time. I did so but did not obtain them, also

the third and the fourth year, at which time I obtained them and translated them into the English language by the gift and power of God.²⁰

Some historical details: age, time of day, dress of angel, location above the floor, metal of plates, burial place, Indians are descendants of Abraham, instruments to aid in translation, yearly visits, translation into English.

1838 "History of Joseph Smith" (JS-H 1)

29 On the evening of the . . . twenty-first of September [1823²¹], after I had retired to my bed for the night, . . .

30 . . . Immediately a personage appeared at my bedside, standing in the air, for his feet did not touch the floor.

31 He had on a loose robe. . . . His hands were naked, and his arms also, a little above the wrist; so, also, were his feet naked, as were his legs, a little above the ankles. His head and neck were also bare. I could discover that he had no other clothing on but this robe, as it was open, so that I could see into his bosom. . . .

34 He said there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang. He also said that the fulness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants;

35 Also, that there were two stones in silver bows—and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim—deposited with the plates; . . . and that God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book. . . .

42 Again, he told me, that when I got those plates of which he had spoken . . . I should not show them to any person; neither the breastplate with the Urim and Thummim. . . . The vision was opened to my mind that I could see the place where the plates were deposited, and that so clearly and distinctly that I knew the place again when I visited it. . . .

46 [He] added a caution to me, telling me that Satan would try to tempt me (in consequence of the indigent circumstances of my father's family), to get the plates for the purpose of getting rich. . . .

51 Convenient to the village of Manchester, Ontario county, New York, stands a hill of considerable size. . . . On the west side of this hill, not far from the top, under a stone of considerable size, lay the plates, deposited in a stone box. This stone was thick and rounding in the middle on the upper side, and thinner towards the edges, so that the middle part of it was visible above the ground, but the edge all around was covered with earth.

52 Having removed the earth, I obtained a lever, which I got fixed under the edge of the stone, and with a little exertion raised it up. I looked in, and there indeed did I behold the plates, the Urim and Thummim, and the breastplate, as stated by the messenger. The box in which they lay was formed by laying stones together in some kind of cement. In the bottom of the box were

laid two stones crossways of the box, and on these stones lay the plates and the other things with them. . . .

59 At length the time arrived for obtaining the plates, the Urim and Thummim, and the breastplate. . . .

60 By the wisdom of God, they remained safe in my hands, until I had accomplished by them what was required at my hand. When, according to arrangements, the messenger called for them, I delivered them up to him; and he has them in his charge until this day, being the second day of May, one thousand eight hundred and thirty-eight. . . .

I wish to mention here, that the Title Page of the Book of Mormon is a literal translation, taken from the very last leaf, on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates, . . . the language of the whole running same as all Hebrew writing in general; and that said Title Page is not by any means a modern composition either of mine or of any other man's who has lived or does live in this generation. . . . The Title Page of the English Version of the Book of Mormon . . . is a genuine and literal translation of the title-page of the Original Book of Mormon, as recorded on the plates.²²

Some historical details: exact date, time of day, angel at bedside, standing in air, detailed description of clothing, metal of plates, description of Urim and Thummim, prohibition against showing, temptation to profit from plates, description of burial location, detailed description of box, physical exertion to open it, content of box, angel retrieves plates, origin of title page, direction of writing.

Newspaper article, July 1838

Moroni, the person who deposited the plates, . . . being dead and raised again therefrom, appeared unto me and told me where they were and gave me directions how to obtain them. I obtained them and the Urim and Thummim with them, by the means of which I translated the plates. And thus came the Book of Mormon.²³

1842 "Church History"

On the evening of the twenty-first of September, a.d. 1823, . . . on a sudden a light like that of day, only of a far purer and more glorious appearance and brightness, burst into the room. Indeed, the first sight was as though the house was filled with consuming fire. The appearance produced a shock that affected the whole body. In a moment a personage stood before me, surrounded with a glory yet greater than that with which I was already surrounded. . . .

I was also informed concerning the aboriginal inhabitants of this country. . . . I was also told where there were deposited some plates on which was engraven an abridgement of the records of the ancient prophets that had existed

on this continent. . . . On the morning of the twenty-second of September a.d. 1827, the angel of the Lord delivered the records into my hands.

These records were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold, each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long and not quite so thick as common tin. They were filled with engravings . . . and bound together in a volume, as the leaves of a book with three rings running through the whole. The volume was something near six inches in thickness, a part of which was sealed. The characters on the unsealed part were small, and beautifully engraved. The whole book exhibited many marks of antiquity in its construction and much skill in the art of engraving. With the records was found a curious instrument which the ancients called "Urim and Thummim," which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow fastened to a breastplate.

Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift, and power of God. . . .

We are informed by these records that America in ancient times has been inhabited by two distinct races of people. The first were called Jaredites and came directly from the tower of Babel. The second race came directly from the city of Jerusalem, about six hundred years before Christ. They were principally Israelites, of the descendants of Joseph. The Jaredites were destroyed about the time that the Israelites came from Jerusalem, who succeeded them in the inheritance of the country. The principal nation of the second race fell in battle towards the close of the fourth century. The remnant are the Indians that now inhabit this country. . . . The last of their prophets who existed among them was commanded to write an abridgement of their prophesies, history, and so forth, and to hide it up in the earth, and that it should come forth and be united with the Bible for the accomplishment of the purposes of God in the last days.²⁴

Some historical details: time of day, exact date, description of glory, existence and location of people in record, date and time of day of reception of plates, detailed description of plates, description of Urim and Thummim, discussion of groups of people in book, origin of Jaredites and Lehites, date of Lehite departure, date of Nephite demise, Indian descent, abridgment and burial of record.

Newspaper article, May 1842 (concerning some mummified remains of Native Americans that had been found)

The Book of Mormon gives an account of a number of the descendants of Israel coming to this continent; and it is well known that the art of embalming was known among the Hebrews. . . .

This art was no doubt transmitted from Jerusalem to this continent by the before-mentioned emigrants, which accounts for the finding of the mummies, and at the same time is another strong evidence of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.²⁵

Journal entry, May 1844 (from a conversation with some Sac and Fox Indians)

The Great Spirit has enabled me to find a book [showing them the Book of Mormon], which told me about your fathers.²⁶

Joseph Smith thus spoke and wrote in some detail about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. He stated that an angel appeared in his room, stood above the floor, and spoke of ancient people who once lived in the Americas—the ancestors of today’s Native Americans. He stated that the angel told him about their written record. They had migrated to America from the Old World and were descendants of ancient Israelites. The Prophet described the angel’s appearance and clothing. He described in detail the physical characteristics of the plates, the interpreters, and the box in which they were contained. He stated that this event was not a dream but the actual appearance of a man who once lived, had died, and had been raised again from the dead.

In a consistent way, over the course of his lifetime, Joseph Smith continued to tell and to stand by this same story. I see the following logical possibilities for evaluating what he stated concerning the Book of Mormon and the words that he attributed to the angel Moroni:

- Option 1.* Joseph Smith was an impostor who lied about the coming of the angel and the origin of the Book of Mormon.
- Option 2.* Joseph Smith sincerely believed that an angel appeared to him, and he believed that his English Book of Mormon text was translated from a golden book. But none of it was true.
- Option 3.* An angel really appeared to Joseph Smith, but there were no plates and the Book of Mormon is not historical.
 - a. Hence what Joseph Smith reported that the angel said is not true, or
 - b. what the angel told Joseph Smith was not true. (It was either an angel of the devil or a less-than-honest angel.²⁷)

- Option 4.* An angel really appeared to Joseph Smith, and there really were gold plates, but the Book of Mormon is not historical.
- a. Hence what Joseph Smith reported that the angel said is not true, or
 - b. what the angel told Joseph Smith was not true.
- Option 5.* The whole story is true: an angel really appeared to Joseph Smith, there really were gold plates, and the Book of Mormon is historical, as both Joseph Smith and the angel asserted.

Evidence from the Doctrine and Covenants

According to God in the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants, Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites (that is, peoples known only from the history in the Book of Mormon) are living today (D&C 3:16–18). The Book of Mormon is “the testimony of their fathers.” They are “in unbelief because of the iniquity of their fathers.” They will “come to the knowledge of their fathers . . . [and] the promises of the Lord” (3:17–20). God’s “other sheep” were a branch of the house of Israel. He would bring forth “their marvelous works, which they did in [his] name,” as well as his gospel, “which was ministered unto them” (10:60–62).

According to God in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Book of Mormon is an account “engraven upon the plates of Nephi” (10:38–41, 45). It is “the record of Nephi” (10:42), “an abridgment of the account of Nephi” (10:44). Joseph Smith was to “translate [the] first part of the engravings of Nephi” (10:45).

According to God in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Book of Mormon contains what God’s ancient “holy prophets” and “disciples” “desired in their prayers should come forth” to us in our day. In ancient times, God promised them that it would be so “according to their faith in their prayers” (10:46–47). They had faith that the gospel that was given them to “preach in their days” would come to “their brethren the Lamanites” in our day. And it was “their faith in their prayers” that it would be made known also to other nations who would possess this land (10:48–49). Those ancient “prophets” and “disci-

ples” (10:46) left “a blessing on this land in their prayers,” that whoever would believe the gospel in their record would “have eternal life” (10:50). According to the “faith in [the] prayers” of those ancient persons, God would bring forth “this part of [his] gospel to the knowledge of” His people in our time (10:52).

According to God in the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith had the plates (5:1). He was not allowed to show them to anyone unless God told him (5:3). God would show the plates to three witnesses and would declare their truth to them (5:11–13). Their testimony will condemn those who do not believe them (5:18). Martin Harris would see the plates and “know of a surety that they are true” (5:25–26). Joseph Smith had the “Urim and Thummim” (10:1). He had to finish “the remainder of the work of translation” (10:3) but was not to retranslate what was lost (10:30–31).

According to God in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Three Witnesses would see the plates, the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, and the Liahona (17:1–2). After those witnesses will “have seen them with [their] eyes,” they would testify of them (17:3). They would testify that they had seen them, just as Joseph Smith had seen them (17:5).

According to God in the Doctrine and Covenants, “as your Lord and your God liveth [the Book of Mormon] is true” (17:6). It “contains the truth and the word of God” (19:26). Today’s Native Americans are “a remnant” of the Jews (19:27). Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith (20:6). He “gave him power from on high, by the means which were before prepared, to translate the Book of Mormon” (20:8), which “contains a record of a fallen people” (20:9). God sent Moroni to Joseph Smith (27:5). He was “an angel from heaven” (128:20).

Thus the Lord’s words in the Doctrine and Covenants bear a straightforward and consistent testimony concerning the historicity of the Book of Mormon, with repeated reference to its ancient authors. I see four logical possibilities for evaluating these statements in the Doctrine and Covenants concerning the Book of Mormon:

Option 1. Joseph Smith was an impostor and made up these so-called revelations.

- Option 2.* Joseph Smith sincerely believed that these were revelations, but none of them came from God, and none of them are true.
- Option 3.* These are real revelations from God, but what God told Joseph Smith in them is not true.
- Option 4.* These are real revelations from God, and what God told Joseph Smith in them is true.

It seems to me that if one believes that the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants do indeed come from God, one will be compelled to accept His statements concerning the historicity of the persons and events discussed in the Book of Mormon.

Evidence from the Three and Eight Witnesses

Since the Lord, by revelation, designated the witnesses to be independent evidence for the truth of the Book of Mormon (D&C 17:3–6), we do well when we take their accounts seriously. They were, after all, selected not for their own sake but for the sake of adding further testimonies about the Book of Mormon to that of Joseph Smith.

The testimonies of the witnesses are an important part of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, because now there were others who could state with Joseph Smith, “We . . . have seen the plates. . . . And we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us. . . . And we declare with words of soberness, that an angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes, that we beheld and saw the plates.”²⁸

Given the range of logical possibilities for the origin of the Book of Mormon, the fact that witnesses claimed to see the angel and the plates might not be sufficient evidence for critics who maintain that there may well have been an angel and maybe even some plates but that the content of the book is not historical. But there is more to the testimony of the witnesses. In the June 1829 revelation in which the Lord designated the Three Witnesses, he told them that they would see, in addition to the plates, “the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount,

when he talked with the Lord face to face, and the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi while in the wilderness, on the borders of the Red Sea” (D&C 17:1). The significance of these items is that they are all objects that are mentioned in the account in the Book of Mormon text itself. They are not external to the narrative but are artifacts from the *history* in the book. This means that if the experience of the Three Witnesses took place as they said it did, they saw evidence not only that there was a divinely revealed book but also that the account in it is historical. Accordingly, the Three Witnesses saw, along with the Book of Mormon plates (according to David Whitmer), “the sword of Laban, the Directors (i.e. the ball which Lehi had) and the Interpreters.”²⁹ In addition, they also saw “the Brass Plates,”³⁰ another artifact discussed in the text itself. Thus the Three Witnesses were shown a collection of souvenirs from the history recorded in the Book of Mormon. And all of this was part of God’s merciful plan to provide us with witnesses for the book.

Since the beginning of the Church, the testimonies of the witnesses have been a problem for those who reject Joseph Smith. These men’s lives are well documented. They were respected in their communities and were considered by their contemporaries to be not only of sound character but also of sound mind. Sadly, in the late 1830s each of the Three Witnesses left the Church, becoming disillusioned with Joseph Smith personally over matters of doctrine and administration. Two were later rebaptized, yet all three continued to maintain, even in their days of disassociation from the Church, that their published testimony was a true account of an actual supernatural event in which they had been participants.³¹ Ironically, the disaffection of the witnesses adds to the credibility of their testimonies. Had the experience been fraudulent, the witnesses no doubt would have seized the opportunity to expose the Prophet as an impostor. But they remained true to their statements even when they felt personal animosity toward Joseph Smith.

The following logical possibilities can be used to evaluate the testimonies of the Three and Eight Witnesses:

Option 1. The eleven men—otherwise well-known and respected citizens—each lied about their experiences

with great consistency over the course of their lifetimes. The events never took place.

Option 2. The eleven men—otherwise well-known and respected citizens—sincerely believed throughout their lives that the events took place. But the events never really happened.

Option 3. The events took place as described by the eleven men.

Today, while some say that the Book of Mormon is somehow “true” but not historical, the testimonies of the witnesses expose their point of view as nonsense by providing evidence that cannot be dismissed. Reasonable men claimed throughout their lives that they saw an angel, handled the plates and other artifacts from the account in the book, and heard the voice of God. It is no wonder that the witnesses were foreknown by revelation and prepared by the Lord to perform their important calling to bear testimony of His work (D&C 17:1–9; Ether 5:1–4). The Book of Mormon still contains their “words of soberness” that are as valid today as they were in 1830 when the book first came off the press.

Judging the Evidence

Our evidence compels us to judge the credibility of the argument against the historicity of the Book of Mormon, or, on the other hand, the credibility of the evidence discussed above.

Given all the clear and consistent claims in favor of historicity made by the Book of Mormon itself, by Joseph Smith, by other witnesses, and by the revelations of God to Joseph Smith, what credibility could any of these sources have if the book is not historical?

Can the Book of Mormon indeed be “true,” in *any* sense, if it lies repeatedly, explicitly, and deliberately regarding its own historicity? Can Joseph Smith be viewed with *any* level of credibility if he repeatedly, explicitly, and deliberately lied concerning the historicity of the book? Can we have *any* degree of confidence in what are presented as the words of God in the Doctrine and Covenants if they repeatedly, explicitly, and deliberately lie by asserting the historicity of the Book of Mormon? If the Book of Mormon is not what it claims

to be, what possible cause would anyone have to accept *anything* of the work of Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints given the consistent assertions that the Book of Mormon is an ancient text that describes ancient events?

This is not an invitation for anyone to leave the Church. It is, instead, an invitation to abandon the fallacious and logically impossible argument that the Book of Mormon can be true, though not historical, while Joseph Smith, the revelations of God, and the book itself claim in clear and unmistakable terms the opposite.

As one chooses to embrace the gospel, the other line of reasoning must be pursued. The book's repeated assertion of its historicity, the faithful testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith concerning it, and the voice of God speaking to us of it through the Doctrine and Covenants join with the spirit of personal revelation and testimony in bearing witness that the Book of Mormon is a genuine historical record of ancient origin.

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Notes

1. According to Anthony A. Hutchinson, "Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints should confess in faith that the Book of Mormon is the word of God but also abandon claims that it is a historical record of the ancient peoples of the Americas. We should accept that it is a work of scripture inspired by God . . . but one that has as its human author Joseph Smith, Jr." "The Word of God is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-Century Scripture," *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 1. A similar notion that is even more intellectually inconsistent is found in Blake T. Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 1 (spring 1987), 66–123.

2. According to Hutchinson, "Ultimately whether the Book of Mormon is ancient really does not matter." Hutchinson, 16. According to Mark D. Thomas, "In the final analysis the book's authority cannot depend on its age. If the Book of Mormon's message is profound, that alone should be sufficient reason for serious analysis and

dialogue.” “A Rhetorical Approach to the Book of Mormon: Rediscovering Nephite Sacramental Language,” Metcalfe, 53.

3. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. *true* (regarding “a statement or belief”).

4. *Webster’s New International Dictionary*, 3d ed., s.v. *true*.

5. *Ibid.*, s.v. *historical*.

6. *Ibid.*, s.v. *historicity*.

7. Though I do not know personally if any or all of the parables are historical or not, for the sake of this discussion, I am willing to concede that their impressive teaching capacity is not dependent on whether the persons or events in them depict real history.

8. Following the same argument, Joseph Smith’s status as a true prophet is not dependent on the historicity of events in the Book of Mormon.

9. This is the argument of Hutchinson, 1–19.

10. *Record(s)*: 1 Ne. 1:2–3, 17; 6:1; 19:1–2, 4; 2 Ne. 5:29; Jacob 7:26; Enos 1:13–16; Jarom 1:14; Omni 1:9, 11; W of M: 1:1–3, 5–6, 9–10; Mosiah 1:6; 8:12–13; 12:8; 21:27; 28:11, 20; Alma 3:12; 5:2; 18:36, 38; 23:5; 35:16; 37:1–2, 9; 44:24; 45:2; 47:1; 50:38; Hel. 3:13, 15; 16:25; 3 Ne. 1:2–3; 2:9; 5:9–11, 14–18; 8:1; 17:25; 23:7–8; 28:18; 4 Ne. 1:19, 21, 47–49; Morm. 1:1–2; 2:17; 4:23; 6:1, 6; 7:8; 8:1, 4–5, 12, 14; 9:32–33; Ether 1:3, 6; 2:13; 4:17; 6:1; 9:1; 12:20; 13:1, 14; 15:11, 33; Moro. 9:24; 10:2.

11. *Plates*: 1 Ne. 1:17; 6:1, 3, 6; 9:1–5; 10:1; 19:1–6; 2 Ne. 4:14–15; 5:4, 29–33; Jacob 1:1–4; 3:13–14; 4:1–3; 7:26–27; Jarom 1:2, 14–15; Omni 1:1, 3, 8, 11, 14, 18, 25, 30; W of M 1:3–6, 9–10; Mosiah 1:6, 16; 8:19; 21:27; 28:11; Alma 37:9, 21; 44:24; 3 Ne. 5:10–11; 26:7, 11; 4 Ne. 1:19, 21; Morm. 1:4; 2:17–18; 6:6; 8:5, 14; 9:33; Ether 1:2, 4; 4:4; 5:2.

12. *Write* and cognates: 1 Ne. 1:16; 6:1, 3, 5; 8:30; 9:1; 10:15; 13:35–36; 14:25, 28, 30; 17:6; 19:3, 6, 18; 2 Ne. 3:12, 18–19; 4:14–15, 25; 5:4, 12; 11:1–2; 25:1, 3, 6, 8, 21–23, 26; 26:15, 17; 28:2; 29:10, 12; 30:3; 31:1–2; 33:1, 3–5, 11; Jacob 1:2; 3:13; 4:1–2, 4; 7:26–27; Enos 1:23; Jarom 1:1–2, 14; Omni 1:1, 4, 9, 11; W of M 1:2–3, 5, 11; Mosiah 1:8; 8:1; 17:4; 28:11, 19; Alma 8:1; 9:34; 11:46; 13:31; 44:24; Hel. 2:14; 8:3; 14:1; 3 Ne. 5:8, 18; 7:17; 16:4; 17:15, 17; 19:32, 34; 23:4, 6, 11–12; 24:1; 26:6, 8, 11–12, 18; 27:23–24; 28:25; 30:1; 4 Ne. 1:21; Morm. 3:17–20; 5:9, 12; 7:9; 8:1, 3–5, 23; 9:31–35; Ether 1:4; 2:12; 3:17, 22–24, 27; 4:1, 4–5; 5:1; 8:20, 26; 12:23–25, 40; 13:1, 13; 15:33–34; Moro. 1:1, 4; 7:1; 9:7, 24; 10:1, 27, 29.

13. *Book(s)*: 1 Ne. 10:15; 2 Ne. 3:23; 26:17; 27:6–12, 14–15, 17, 19, 22, 29; 28:2; 30:3; Omni 1:4, 9; Mosiah 1:8; 8:1; Alma 9:34; 13:31; Hel. 2:13–14; 16:25; 3 Ne. 5:8; 7:17; 26:6; 4 Ne. 1:21; Morm. 1:1; Ether 1:2.

14. *Account*: 1 Ne. 1:16–17; 6:3; 9:2–4; 10:1; 19:4–5; W of M 1:3; Mosiah 21:35; 28:9; 28:17–19; Alma 22:1, 35; 28:8–9; 35:13; 43:3; 63:17; Hel. 2:14; 3:14, 17; 3 Ne. 5:9, 16, 19; 10:19; Morm. 2:18; 5:9; Ether 1:1–6; 3:17; Moro. 1:1.

15. *Engrave* and cognates: 1 Ne. 9:3, 4; 19:1–2; 2 Ne. 5:30–32; Jacob 1:1–4; 4:1, 3; Jarom 1:14; Omni 1:11; Mosiah 21:27–28; Morm. 1:3–4; 3 Ne. 5:10; 26:11.
16. In the following texts, I have provided modern punctuation and spelling.
17. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–92), 1:7–9.
18. Joseph Smith to editor, *American Revivalist and Rochester Observer*, 4 January 1833; Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 273.
19. Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, 4 June 1834; Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 324.
20. Joseph Smith Diary, 9 November 1835; Jessee, *Papers*, 2:69–71.
21. The year is identified in verse 28.
22. Jessee, *Papers*, 1:276–81, 283–84, 300–1. All but the last paragraph is in the Joseph Smith–History in the Pearl of Great Price.
23. *Elders' Journal* 1, no. 3 (July 1838), 42–43.
24. *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (1 March 1842): 707–8.
25. *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 13 (2 May 1842): 781–82.
26. Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 6:402.
27. But angels “speak the words of Christ” (2 Ne. 32:3), and thus they do not lie.
28. “The Testimony of Three Witnesses,” Book of Mormon.
29. Interview with Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith, 7–8 September 1878, Joseph F. Smith Diary, LDS Church Archives; Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews* (Orem, Utah: Grandin, 1991), 26; see also George Q. Cannon interview, 27 February 1884; Cook, 108.
30. Cook, 25.
31. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981).