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No Middle Ground: The Debate over the Authenticity of the Book of Mormon

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Louis Midgley

The authenticity of the Book of Mormon has been under attack since before the book was published. While the Book of Mormon has been called everything from fiction and fraud to the product of demonic possession, the current argument against its authenticity seeks to find a “middle ground” between these claims and what the Book of Mormon itself claims to be—inspired writings of ancient prophets. The “middle-ground” genre of attack professes that the Book of Mormon can still be scripture, in that it inspires and motivates, even though the people and events detailed therein, and Joseph Smith’s account of angelic visitors and gold plates, are not historically true. This type of argument is invalid because we cannot accept as simply motivational that which claims to be historical reality.

There is no middle ground on the question of whether the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text. On this—but not of course on every issue—we are confronted with an either/or possibility. Why? The Book of Mormon claims to be a record largely written and/or edited by Mormon, an ancient prophet and military leader who, according to the book itself, lived from approximately A.D. 327 to 385 somewhere in the New World. In fashioning his account, Mormon included or drew upon records begun by Nephi thirty years after his family traveled from Palestine to the New World, soon after 600 B.C.

There is nothing in the Book of Mormon (or in Joseph Smith’s account of its coming forth) that suggests that it should be read as

anything other than historical fact. On the other hand, critics of the Book of Mormon have always insisted that it is a product of the nineteenth century—that it reflects the thinking and the world of Joseph Smith (or one of his contemporaries) immediately prior to its publication. I will sketch some of the permutations of these two large categories of competing approaches to the Book of Mormon. The focus has always been on whether the Book of Mormon is what it and the Latter-day Saints declare it to be: an authentic ancient record of divine revelations to peoples called by God out of the wicked societies in which they found themselves in a providential effort to keep alive the covenants made with their fathers. The publication of the Book of Mormon constitutes for faithful Latter-day Saints a crucial, initial generative or founding event of the restoration of the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the reestablishment of the kingdom of God on earth.

The Book of Mormon and the story of its coming forth provoked some of Joseph Smith's contemporaries to attempt to demonstrate that it is fraudulent—that it is not an authentic ancient history and therefore that its teachings are a deception, if not blasphemy. The first critics insisted that the Book of Mormon must be read as a modern book—as somehow a product of the time and place in which it was initially published; they have thus striven to provide plausible alternative explanations of the Book of Mormon precisely because of its crucial role in both grounding and forming the content of the faith and memory of Latter-day Saints. Hence, from at least 1831, the Saints have been confronted with literature that criticizes the Book of Mormon—the crux of which has been an attack on its historicity.¹ From virtually the moment the Book of Mormon appeared in print, both the Saints and their critics have seen it as either what it claims to be or as essentially fraudulent.

The historicity of the Book of Mormon has thus been a crucial issue for both the Saints and the critics of Joseph Smith and the restored gospel. The critics, with few exceptions, still insist that both its narrative structures and prophetic teachings are essentially a muddled hodgepodge. Sectarian anti-Mormons on the most extreme fringe of Protestant evangelical religiosity insist that the book is demonic and that Joseph Smith was under the influence of what they describe as Satanic forces.² A more moderate faction of evangelical

anti-Mormons has been at war with their extremist colleagues.³ Only recently have the sectarian criticisms of the Book of Mormon tended to move away from the old, discredited attacks that were set in place during the first decades after its publication.

The explanation for such shifts seems to be that it is no longer possible to gain the attention of knowledgeable Latter-day Saints with the old, frenzied attacks on the Book of Mormon once common in sectarian circles. This fact has yielded a shift in the approach to the Book of Mormon among its more thoughtful sectarian critics. And better-informed non-LDS observers of Mormon things now recognize the importance of the Book of Mormon to the faith of the Saints; they sense something of its subtle complexity; they respect the way it both grounds and forms the content of the faith and memory of the Saints; and they also sense its power to fill the lives of the Saints with an understanding of their relationship with God.⁴

An Ancient or a Modern Book?

“The Book of Mormon,” according to Hugh Nibley, “must be read as an ancient, not as a modern book. Its mission, as described by the book itself, depends in great measure for its efficacy on its genuine antiquity.”⁵ When confronted with the Book of Mormon and the story of its coming forth, the decisive question is whether it is—as it claims—an account of the inspired teachings of ancient prophets initially led from Jerusalem through Lehi’s prophetic guidance soon after 600 B.C., and hence also an authentic history of some of the inhabitants of the New World.

When the Book of Mormon is read as a modern book, Joseph Smith must be seen as a liar who knowingly made up a preposterous tale with which he may have intended to attract and manipulate gullible followers. Or he must be pictured as unable to distinguish between actually encountering an angel, eventually possessing plates, interpreters, and so forth, and not having had those experiences, in which case the Book of Mormon would turn out to be a bizarre product of his abnormal psychology. The issues surrounding the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon thus come down to an either/or choice not only regarding its truth claims but also regarding whether or not Joseph Smith was a genuine prophet. On this crucial issue there

is simply no middle ground. Critics of the restored gospel have understood this from the beginning. The not-prophet explanations have ranged from attempts to demonstrate that Joseph Smith perpetrated a conscious fraud, to efforts to portray him as someone sincere about his illusions, or perhaps in some way psychologically dissociative and hence delusional, or to some combination of these explanations.

Against these alternative explanations, the Saints maintain that the Book of Mormon is precisely what it purports to be—a divinely inspired, providentially recorded and preserved account of ancient peoples separated from the inhabitants of the Old World, recorded on metal plates and revealed to Joseph Smith by an angel who was also once a participant in the events it records. Joseph Smith is also seen as a genuine prophet by the Saints. Both the Saints and the more thoughtful critics have thus understood that the explanation for the Book of Mormon must be consistent with its prophetic and historical contents. This is true whether one reads it as an authentic ancient text or as a nineteenth-century fabrication and hoax.

Both sectarian and secular critics of the Book of Mormon begin with the assumption that Mormon (who claimed to have provided the final redaction) and the Nephite prophets and scribes named in the volume were not its true authors; critics have therefore had to identify its modern author (or authors). They are thus faced with the task of fashioning an explanation that plausibly accommodates all that is known about the book and its coming forth; they have also had to take into account its complex and subtle narrative structure and teachings.

From the beginning, critics have been faced with the question of who wrote the Book of Mormon. Was it Joseph Smith? That was the first explanation,⁶ and it immediately collapsed. Was it written by someone else—a contemporary of Joseph Smith?⁷ Exactly how was this accomplished? Those who reject the Mormon explanation must also explain how and why it was composed. In whatever way the critics tell the story and whatever the motives they attribute to Joseph Smith (or to those involved in a supposed conspiracy), they must explain both the existence and contents of the Book of Mormon. Since earlier attempts to credit its composition to someone other than Joseph Smith have floundered,⁸ we are currently confronted with a return to the stance of its original critics who insisted that it was written by

Joseph Smith.⁹ Those who now fashion naturalistic explanations of the Book of Mormon are faced with the task of uncovering in Joseph Smith's immediate environment or in the workings of his psyche all of the sources for its complicated narrative structure, style, cast of characters, prophetic teachings, and so forth.¹⁰

In addition to the usual array of sectarian criticisms of the Book of Mormon, believers are now also confronted with secular explanations that dogmatically and systematically remove the divine from the natural world and, more importantly, from history. Thus, "in our day," according to one recent attempt to account for historical understanding, "of course, the deity is absent."¹¹ When historians approach the Book of Mormon with such a dogma, every effort will be made to deny that it is authentic. However, to begin with that assumption, and it is clearly an assumption and not somehow the conclusion of a demonstration, is to beg all the important questions raised by the existence of a text such as the Book of Mormon.

In one way or another, recent attempts to remove the mighty acts of God either overtly or inadvertently from the Saints' understanding of the past undermine the grounds for, and also radically alter the content of, the faith of the Saints. They do so by treating what they believe is the actual presence of the divine in human affairs as mere instances of sincere though mistaken illusion or delusion, or as the product of outright fraud.

Secular Assumptions and Revisionist Accounts

The role of secular, naturalistic assumptions in undermining or transforming the supernatural or the miraculous in the interpretation of the Bible is well known.¹² What is less well known is the role of such assumptions in efforts to tell the story of religion generally. Historians are often either not aware of or are silent about their guiding assumptions, though they sometimes divulge them. For example, in the 1975 edition of his massive two-volume history of religion in America, Sydney E. Ahlstrom grants that no one can "say that he can in one lifetime write an American religious history 'from the sources.'"¹³ Anyone taking on such a task would have to rely on a vast number of secondary works. A history of American religion must be synthetic, depending on the assimilation of essays written by

others who specialize in the parts which are then assembled into the larger picture on the basis of some controlling theme, idea, or explanatory hypothesis.

When the paperback edition of his book first appeared, Professor Ahlstrom could “see no grounds for expecting drastic changes in the Western historiographical tradition. . . . This tradition began to free itself from ecclesiastical surveillance and providential interpretations during the Renaissance; and ever since then, despite the pride and petulance of historians and interference from both church and state, the overall accuracy, coherence, and plausibility of its explanations have improved. Historiography may be an ideal construction in constant need of revision; but it is not a trick or a fable. So the work goes on. Fads and fashions come and go.”¹⁴

Ahlstrom added that “the ideas of even the most magisterial thinkers, like Marx and Freud, are only very slowly assimilated. Yet week by week, in seminars, classrooms, and scholars’ studies the effort is sustained.”¹⁵ Apparently the great leap forward in understanding religion in America involves, at least from Ahlstrom’s perspective, the assimilation of assumptions and explanations that reduce religion to delusion, in the case of Karl Marx,¹⁶ or illusion, in the case of Sigmund Freud.¹⁷ Presumably these are not the “fads and fashions [that] come and go,” but bedrock truths that must be “very slowly assimilated.”

To his credit, Ahlstrom also sensed that “the present, after all, is but a thin film on the past, an imaginary figment; while the future exists only as a possibility—or a negation. In a certain sense, therefore, we all live and have our being in the past.”¹⁸ He then insisted, and correctly, that a people or “a nation that is unaware of its past bears an alarming similarity to a person suffering from amnesia: a crucial element of its being is lacking.”¹⁹ He also noted that Americans have experienced a break in the continuity they previously had with the past.²⁰ Why? Partly because they, much like various communities of believers, have either forgotten their past or have had it interpreted or reinterpreted out from under them by historians whose explanations have transformed it under the relentless pressure of the dominant ideas of the age in which they live. Are not at least religious communities insulated from the corrosive effects of secular assump-

tions by their own beliefs and understandings—their faith? Not in the least. Why?

Ahlstrom sensed that “the historian cannot claim divinely inspired sources of insight, nor can he place one body of holy scripture above another.”²¹ But are they really all that neutral and unable to pass judgment? Have not secular notions advanced by the likes of Marx and Freud—those magisterial thinkers Ahlstrom seems to celebrate, and their many followers—had their impact on the work of historians?

The faith and memory of believing peoples has not fared very well when it has been explained from within the categories of secular modernity. This is the larger issue. The stories told by secularized historians have had profoundly corrosive impacts on communities of faith.²² For Christians in general, the corrosive effect of secular categories and explanations has been on the understanding of the miraculous elements in the accounts contained in the Bible. For Latter-day Saints, however, the question is primarily how naturalistic explanations of the Book of Mormon impact faith.²³

C. S. Lewis has pointed out that “what cannot be trusted to recur is not material for science: that is why history is not one of the sciences. . . . Thus hand over miracles from science to history (but not, of course, to historians who beg the question by beginning with materialist assumptions).”²⁴ Those secular critics who dogmatically reject the historicity of the Book of Mormon approach the text with what amounts to essentially naturalistic assumptions. With these in place they typically avoid taking seriously the possibility that it is an authentic ancient text and that Joseph Smith was therefore a genuine prophet. This means that much of the literature critical of the historicity of the Book of Mormon involves in various and sometimes subtle ways the logical fallacy of question begging—that is, critics make the desired conclusion work as their beginning premise.

But it is a mistake to begin with naturalistic assumptions that rule out in advance the possibility of divine revelation. Critics of the historicity of the Book of Mormon regularly begin with naturalistic assumptions that set in place exactly the conclusion they wish to reach. When confronted with an account in which a nonnatural (or in that sense “supernatural”) element is present in a prophetic truth

claim, as it clearly is in the case of the Book of Mormon, the wise course is to avoid the fallacy of question begging.

C. S. Lewis was also right in holding that “history is not one of the sciences” precisely because “what cannot be trusted to recur is not material for science.”²⁵ But the enormous reputation of the natural sciences has generated a kind of secular “religion” that can be called scientism—the belief that naturalistic explanations can (or should eventually be able to) explain everything, including alleged instances of divine special revelations. Hence, what Lewis described as “miracle” is present in what are believed to be real events. It is found in the mighty acts of God, the appearance of divine messengers, theophanies, the presence of the divine on the stage of human history, and so forth; it is not, from the perspective of the believers, mere illusion or delusion or subjective emotional responses to presumably “natural” environmental forces. If the believers are wrong about this, their faith is simply in vain. Hence, what Lewis called miracle, understood this way, is a necessary or essential element of the faith and memory of Latter-day Saints.

Reading the Book of Mormon with Naturalistic Assumptions

Whatever else might be said about them, secular, naturalistic assumptions effectively remove the divine from the stage of human history. Is it possible to find ways of preserving some modicum of religiosity in the face of secular fashions? When the miraculous has been removed, can a sentimental something be retained? One writer reports that in 1835 David Friedrich Strauss, the author of the famous *Das Leben Jesu*, denied “the historicity of all miracles, the resurrection, and most of the contents of the gospels.” But Strauss also thought it possible “to save the eternal truths contained in the historically dubious record through the concept of myth.” It turns out that in the background assumptions of secularized intellectuals such as Strauss, “reason destroys truth by its naturalistic explanations; the use of myth allows the preservation of truth in the face of rationalism.”²⁶ How?

For example, treating the writers of the Gospels as purveyors of fables and myths presumably saves them from being seen as base deceivers.²⁷ It does this by entirely deliteralizing the content of the

teachings found in the Gospels. Jesus, for example, is no longer seen as having been resurrected; Paul only “saw” Jesus *in a new light* on the road to Damascus. So it turns out that much like liberal biblical critics who strive to find some way of salvaging something from what is left when the miraculous is dogmatically removed, both historians generally and now also a few Mormon historians have struggled to find a way of salvaging something when they have reduced the divine to myth and fable in their highly secularized accounts.

Accordingly, we have an explanation for the recent spate of efforts to read the Book of Mormon as merely a kind of extended parable, a kind of morality tale or fable, as inspiring or inspired “frontier fiction,”²⁸ and thereby for efforts to turn Joseph Smith’s prophetic charisms into instances of magic, myth, and mysticism.²⁹

The faith and memory—the very identity—of Latter-day Saints is compromised and radically transformed and even logically undercut when certain crucial texts are read with naturalistic assumptions or when naturalistic explanations are employed to explain away the accounts of the divine in those texts by explanations that rule out in advance the possibility that divine revelations are a genuine feature of a real, and not merely a mythical or a fictional, past.

When historians write about the Latter-day Saint past in merely “human and naturalistic terms,” they are clearly employing a vocabulary and also a set of secular assumptions that are well-known to those who, for example, debate the reality of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. And it has been clearly established that to begin a historical inquiry into the resurrection with naturalistic assumptions rules out in advance the resurrection as a historical reality, thus begging the crucial question.³⁰ C. S. Lewis was right in holding that explanations resting on naturalistic assumptions, whatever else one might say about them, end up involving a fallacy, since they beg the crucial questions.

“The Broad, Promising Middle Ground”?

Critics of the Book of Mormon who ground their accounts on naturalistic assumptions generally hold that Joseph Smith is an outright fraud. Recently, however, a few critics have objected to the either-prophet-or-fraud stance. In 1974, one Mormon historian sug-

gested that the scholars “should begin to explore the broad, promising middle ground” between genuine prophet and fraud.³¹ What might this middle ground be? It has been suggested that Joseph Smith was sincere in his illusions or delusions, that he was a magic-saturated, superstitious frontier mystic. They hold that the Saints should abandon the old and presumably fallacious either-prophet-or-fraud alternatives by simply abandoning the notion that Joseph Smith was either intentionally involved in fraud or he was the genuine prophet that the Saints have always believed him to be. The crucial theoretical issue confronting Latter-day Saints who wish to examine the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims is the propriety of what are typically designated naturalistic explanations.

One historian insists that the Book of Mormon “is probably best understood, at least in part, as a trance-related production.”³² Thus the Book of Mormon is not “history in any sense.” Instead, it is “an unusually sophisticated product of unconscious and little-known mental processes.”³³ Such an explanation would supposedly provide a middle ground somewhere between anti-Mormon critics who see the Book of Mormon as an intentional fraud and believers who see it as a genuine ancient text.

These critics often do not understand why Latter-day Saints refuse to accept their essentially secular, naturalistic explanations. There are, no doubt, numerous issues in Latter-day Saint history upon which some middle ground between alternative accounts will turn out to be the most likely explanation. But there is simply no possible middle ground on the question of whether Joseph Smith was a genuine prophet, as Latter-day Saints understand such matters. Likewise, on the question of whether the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient history, there is simply no middle ground.

Though being a Latter-day Saint involves more than accepting the Book of Mormon, it is also not an exaggeration to say, as one prominent non-LDS writer has done, that “non-Mormons become Mormons when they respond to Mormonism’s fundamental truth claims by taking the Book of Mormon at face value.”³⁴ The obvious corollary is that Latter-day Saints become mere cultural Mormons when they begin to invoke naturalistic explanations of the Book of Mormon, that is, explanations that deny that there really was a Lehi colony and that Joseph Smith actually encountered heavenly messen-

gers. Faithful Latter-day Saints, as distinguished from mere dissidents or cultural Mormons, are such precisely because they believe that the Book of Mormon is exactly what it claims to be and also that Joseph Smith's account of its coming forth is simply true.

Because of the crucial role the Book of Mormon (and the account of its recovery) plays in providing both the ground and content for the faith and memory of the Saints, critics of the Restoration, beginning even before the book's publication, flatly denied even the remote possibility that angels could make a book available.³⁵ Since the 1960s, it has been common for some Mormon historians to insist that Mormon history and culture can and should be studied in naturalistic terms. In 1980, when I started examining the programmatic statements of Mormon historians, it became obvious that we would soon be faced with an overt effort by cultural Mormons to read the Book of Mormon as the mere product of nineteenth-century culture. Some revisionist historians, for example, hint that the Book of Mormon should be read as a nineteenth-century fable (reflecting what Joseph Smith was thinking prior to 1830), or they strive to see his account of his encounters with heavenly messengers merely as an embellishment of a half-forgotten dream that later took on theological significance. Joseph Smith is now also pictured by revisionist historians as a profoundly superstitious magician, a village mystic, a kind of dissociative, inventive "genius," and finally as deeply involved in occult lore and practices.³⁶ The Book of Mormon is thus turned into Joseph Smith's imaginative effort to set forth his theological speculations in narrative form.

The Book of Mormon clearly flies in the face of some of the dominant secular ideas of our culture; it challenges certain fundamental assumptions of modernity. And it is controversial. For some with roots in the Restoration, it is a puzzle and an offense. Is there some way to render the Book of Mormon harmless? Some of its critics have striven to find a plausible way of reading it as a product of some primitive superstition or mysticism. They have believed that they could thereby skirt the issue of its historicity. Would reading the Book of Mormon as fiction, as an extended parable or myth of some sort, not reduce at least some of the chagrin experienced by cultural Mormons over the traditional prophetic truth claims upon which the faith of the Latter-day Saints has always rested?

As far as I have been able to determine, during the century and a half after the publication of the Book of Mormon, no effort was made to distinguish its prophetic truth claims—its core message and related teachings—from its claim to be an authentic ancient history. And those who insisted on reading the Book of Mormon as fable and fiction and who insisted on seeing magic, superstition, and imposition in Joseph Smith thought of themselves (and were seen by others) as outside the community of Saints. But it is now not uncommon for critics of the Book of Mormon to want to be seen as sympathetic with those they picture as simplistic believers. And some critics even insist that they are Mormons in at least a cultural sense, even when they are no longer believing Latter-day Saints or in some cases even members of the Church.³⁷ In the last decade or so we have seen efforts by a few people to argue that the sectarian and secular critics of Joseph Smith have always been right—the Book of Mormon is merely the fiction of a highly imaginative farm boy. But, they add, it can be read as either inspiring or perhaps even in some way “inspired,” as a work of a “religious genius,” and so forth.

Whatever else one might say about such stances, they clearly compete with the traditional reading of the Book of Mormon and with the traditional understanding of the Latter-day Saint past. Hence, it is not uncommon for those anxious to legitimize a revisionist reading of the Book of Mormon to use the pejorative label “traditionalist” to describe those who they see clinging to the notion that there was a Lehi colony. These critics have appropriated the label “revisionist” to describe a “new Mormon history,” or a “revisionist Mormon history,” which often includes and even features attacks on the historicity of the Book of Mormon.³⁸

In the past fifteen years, several revisionist readings of the Book of Mormon have appeared in magazines and books. Efforts have been made to legitimize reading the Book of Mormon as fiction, inspiring or otherwise, and also to promote the view that Joseph Smith was essentially a mystic or a practitioner of magic. There is, it seems to me, an alliance between those who see fraud and hence nothing of value in the Book of Mormon and those who see it as an inspired or inspiring fable or as the product of mysticism, magic, and the occult.

Though the Book of Mormon (coupled with the account of its coming forth) is an essential element in the faith of Latter-day Saints,

it is a target for those with sectarian religious commitments and tends to be an annoyance and even an embarrassment to cultural Mormons, including some of those on the fringes of the Mormon academic community who have adopted a naturalistic ideology and therefore dogmatically reject anything that appears “supernatural.” These people are consequently especially offended by its links to an angel and would like to find some way to turn it into harmless, though perhaps “inspiring” nineteenth-century fiction. In so doing they reduce what they call “religion” to the advice of theologians on how to live, thereby denying divine, special revelations. It has therefore become increasingly popular among critics of the Book of Mormon to make a distinction between its historicity and its prophetic teachings. One reason is that it simply will no longer do for critics to dismiss it as a jumble or as blasphemy. In addition, some of those who strive to make such a distinction have been trained in liberal (usually Protestant) divinity schools where the historical reality of much or all of the miraculous in the Bible has been jettisoned and where for the most part only moral sentiments have been retained. Or, in a few instances, those without such formal training have still managed to appropriate some version of this ideology.

Faithful Disbelief

Even before and immediately after the founding of the Mormon History Association in 1965, a few cultural Mormons were hinting at their misgivings about the historicity of the Book of Mormon.³⁹ Eventually some of these historians began to suggest, sometimes in rather ambiguous language, that the Book of Mormon should not be read as an authentic ancient history. But it has only been within the last three decades that those who deny that the Book of Mormon is authentic history have attempted to make a distinction between its historicity and the soundness of its teachings. Some writers have characterized the Book of Mormon “not as literal history, but as inspired allegory” fashioned by Joseph Smith.⁴⁰ And the dogmatic rejection of the possibility of the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon has been taken up by some who claim that such a stance “may offer hope to the ‘closet doubters’ who might agree that ‘you don’t get books from angels and translate them by miracles.’”⁴¹ Hope

for what? A community of cultural “Mormons” consisting of those who disbelieve? One writer describes this position as an instance of “faithful disbelief.”⁴²

There are several reasons for the recent attempts to reject the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon while still claiming to see in it some advice on how to live. Some claim “that all of the hassling over the authenticity of the Book of Mormon is just a waste of time.”⁴³ These critics read the Book of Mormon as a mythology fashioned by Joseph Smith that might contain some nice teachings but not the word of God. However, this entails disposing of the traditional understanding that Joseph Smith was visited by angels and so forth. Some writers have claimed that since the debate over its authenticity has been inconclusive, the conclusions reached have not been based on evidence but on whether one is or is not a believer. They then brush aside the entire debate over the historical authenticity on the grounds of what they sometimes describe as a “heavy-handed either/or approach.”⁴⁴

If historians, as some want us to believe, cannot say anything about sacred matters, if they are prevented from advancing opinions on such things, then they should say exactly nothing about prophetic truth claims; they should not dogmatically assume that prophetic truth claims are false. They should at least leave such questions open, which is exactly what they refuse to do. Why? Is it that they believe that unless historians can finally resolve historical issues, they have no business investigating them? Do they not see that arguing that the Book of Mormon is a nonhistorical “sacred text” entails advancing the proposition that Joseph Smith was not a genuine prophet? To take that position is to take a stand on what are clearly historical matters. So it turns out that the so-called middle-ground explanations of the Book of Mormon merely brush aside the crucial issues raised by the Book of Mormon, which have constituted the content and grounds of the faith and memory of the Latter-day Saints.

Such writers reject an either/or position on the Book of Mormon and turn instead to a middle-ground explanation of the text because they seem less concerned with actual historical events and more concerned with what is traditionally known as “theology.” Latter-day Saints, they complain, “do not so much have a theology as they have a history.”⁴⁵ This is, of course, right. The faith of Latter-day Saints is

not the product of speculation traditionally known as “theology,” that is, the speculation about the divine flowing from a philosophical culture. Latter-day Saints have always looked to events, to accounts of actual encounters with God, for their understanding of divine things, and not to speculation, which they consider to be the primary source of apostate corruption of divine revelation.

Is “Theology” the Answer?

Cultural Mormons have brushed aside divine revelations and are left with nothing but theology. Hence they complain that the Saints confuse history with theology. By looking to prophetic encounters with the divine, rather than the reasoning of theologians, Latter-day Saints find both the content and grounds of faith in accounts of the past. In order to genuinely trust God, to take hold of the forgiveness made available through the Atonement of Christ, one certainly must affirm a number of things about Jesus of Nazareth, including that he was resurrected and that he appeared to the ancient Nephites and eventually to Joseph Smith. Of course, these are believed to be events in time and space and not merely theological speculations. And hence for the Latter-day Saint faith to be true, the Book of Mormon must be exactly what it claims to be. For the Saints, a teaching about Jesus of Nazareth being the Messiah or Christ simply makes no sense apart from essentially historical claims, including that he was killed and then rose again. To take away from faith what are clearly historical claims is to reduce religion to some advice about how to live that is shorn of any real link with God.

Why have critics of the Restoration had an interest in turning the Book of Mormon into fiction? By so doing they feel confident that they have shown that it is fraudulent, and the community of faith for which it serves as a canon is thus grounded on fraud. What is not clear is why a Latter-day Saint would want to read the Book of Mormon as a fable. Nor is it at all clear how the Book of Mormon, read as merely Joseph Smith’s theological speculation cast in fictional form, can be the word of God. Some writers, however, now insist on seeing the Book of Mormon as Joseph Smith’s “theology” and not as history at all. The “theology” they have appropriated is found in both the explanations and in the background assumptions at work in the most

“liberal” portion of contemporary biblical studies, or in the more philosophically grounded efforts to fashion a theology.

Some writers who advance a fashionable middle-ground explanation of the Book of Mormon admit that the basic content of the Christian message must necessarily be grounded in historical fact. The incarnation and resurrection are thus presumably historical. But once one starts down the road of accepting naturalistic explanations, it becomes ever more difficult to protect any historical element of Christian faith from the acids of modernity. And those who want some element of historical content or grounding for their faith—something like the Resurrection of Jesus—end up having to fashion arguments much like those I have proposed to accomplish their ends. But when they do that, they set in place arguments that confront their own secular, naturalistic assumptions.

Moreover, those who, for whatever reason, wish to preserve some modicum of historical content for themselves, as they brush aside the historicity of the Book of Mormon, sometimes argue that contemporary “liberal” theology provides the proper tools for uncovering genuine history rather than mere mythology. Theology is not a scriptural concept; rather, it is a term borrowed by Christians (and others) from Greek philosophy. Theology is words about God—but whose words? For Plato (in the second book of his *Republic*) it was the words of poets in a well-ordered city. What is called “natural theology” is that branch of the study of the nature of First Things. Hence, the natural theology of the Stoics pictured God as the World Soul in an essentially pantheistic picture of divine things. Christians borrowed what they could from the natural theology of the pagans to systematize their beliefs but especially to deliteralize what they found objectionable in the Bible.⁴⁶

Currently, we can see exactly this same sort of thing going on when scholars brush aside Paul’s epiphany on the road to Damascus. The result is that natural theology is not what God reveals to man, nor is it found in the accounts of the encounters of prophets with divine things. It is found instead in the speculation of those whose categories and modes of explanation are borrowed from a philosophical culture that sees only scandal in prophetic charisms. Thus, natural theology is not what God reveals to prophets but what theologians claim to have discovered by unaided human reason.

On the other hand, divine revelation, as Latter-day Saints understand it, necessarily involves accounts of God's mighty acts and in that sense is history. But it is not a secular history written with what C. S. Lewis called materialist assumptions that leave out the possibility of miracles. To put the matter bluntly, theology involves arguments about God and not encounters with God. These arguments are about the nature of First Things, where God is thought of as the First Thing. Theology deliteralizes and mythologizes and then attempts to demythologize, that is, render in the currently fashionable secular terms the messages found in the biblical accounts. And when such a program is followed, we end up being told that the Book of Mormon must be read, if we are to follow the tastes and fashions of others, as a myth understood as fable and not as fact.

An objection to grounding faith on historical claims is that history is notoriously inconclusive. One reason is that the stories we tell rest on assumptions we bring to the texts from which we strive to fashion our accounts. In addition, the sources are far too abundant for any mortal to master them all, and they are far too slim to even begin to settle the more interesting questions about the past. For these and other reasons, philosophers have urged Christians and Jews to turn away from history and strive instead for a religion within the limits of reason alone—to discover what is rationally warranted about divine things. It is in such an endeavor that we presumably will find the certainty for which we long. It must be granted that history will not—cannot—provide certainty. But does faith need or expect the kind of certainty that philosophers (or theologians) insist it must have? I doubt it. Certainly faith needs reasons, even good reasons. For me, and I believe for faithful Latter-day Saints generally, the accounts of the prophets and the record of God's mighty acts are sufficient for both the ground and content of faith. Faith is, after all, not merely believing something but trusting God. And our ability to trust God, to live by faith in love and with a genuine hope for the future, rests upon our appropriation of the stories of God's mighty acts, of our remembering and keeping the commandments—the terms of the covenants that make us the children of Christ.

The task of reframing our lives from the perspective of the gospel, a process that addresses the extremities of our life, accomplishes two tasks at once. On the one hand, by supplanting amnesia

with memory, it gives us a past in which the divine is present in various ways; it directs the Saints as a community back to an unknown or perhaps forfeited past. On the other hand, by genuinely supplanting despair with hope, it leads the Saints to a future both as a community here and now and also as individuals in the hereafter in the kingdom of heaven. The gifts of memory and hope mediated by texts are not a great, coherent system of theology. The gifts, rather, are given one text at a time, texts both old and alien to us, evoking a world not domesticated by our modernity.

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Notes

1. These attacks began with Alexander Campbell's "Delusions," *The Millennial Harbinger* 2, no. 2 (7 February 1831): 85–96; reprinted as *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon; with an Examination of its Internal and External Evidences and a Refutation of Its Pretenses to Divine Authority* (Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1832).
2. Loftes Tryk, *The Best Kept Secrets in the Book of Mormon* (Redondo Beach, Calif.: Jacob's Well Foundation, 1988) is an example of this literature. Other better-known examples of the extreme wing of Protestant evangelical attacks on the Book of Mormon can be found in the writings of James Spencer, William J. Schnobelen, and Ed Decker.
3. Sandra and Jerald Tanner (the current leaders of this less extreme wing of evangelical anti-Mormonism) have countered the likes of Decker and Tryk. For reviews of the literature, see Daniel C. Peterson, "A Modern *Malleus maleficarum*," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 231–60; and Massimo Introvigne, "The Devil Makers: Contemporary Evangelical Fundamentalist Anti-Mormonism," *Dialogue* 27, no. 1 (spring 1994): 153–69; see also Introvigne, "Old Wine in New Bottles: The Story behind Fundamentalist Anti-Mormonism," *BYU Studies* 35, no. 3 (1995–96): 45–73.
4. Jan Shipps provides an instructive example. She appears to have recently abandoned her earlier efforts to explain the Book of Mormon in naturalistic terms. For an account of the gradual development of her understanding of Mormon things, see Louis Midgley, "The Shipps Odyssey in Retrospect," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7, no. 2 (1995): 219–52.

5. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, vol. 6 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 1 (same pagination in 1957, 1964, 1976 editions).

6. Initially advanced by Alexander Campbell. See note 1.

7. See Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled, or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, From Its Rise to the Present Time: With Sketches of the Characters of Its Propegators, and a Full Detail of the Manner in Which the famous Gold Bible was Brought Before the World, to Which are Added, Inquiries into the Probability that the Historical part of the Said Bible was Written by One Solomon Spalding, More than Twenty Years Ago, and by Him intended to have been Published as a Romance* (Painesville, Ohio: printed and published by the author, 1834). This has turned out to be the mother of all anti-Mormon books.

8. The standard explanation for the Book of Mormon in non-LDS circles from 1834 to 1945 was the idea that it had been written by someone other than Joseph Smith—by Sidney Rigdon—who borrowed the names and narrative structure of the book from an old and presumably lost romance written by Solomon Spalding. This explanation has fallen on hard times. Only a very few sectarian writers still push this long-discredited explanation of the Book of Mormon. For a summary of the details concerning this explanation of the Book of Mormon, see Lester E. Bush Jr., “The Spaulding Theory Then and Now,” *Dialogue* 10, no. 4 (autumn 1977): 40–69.

9. See Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Knopf, 1945; rev. ed., 1971). For two recent treatments of Brodie’s book, see Newell G. Bringhurst, ed., *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History: Fawn M. Brodie and Joseph Smith in Retrospect* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1996); and Louis Midgley, “F. M. Brodie—‘The Fasting Hermit and Very Saint of Ignorance’: A Biographer and Her Legend,” *F.A.R.M.S. Review of Books* 8, no. 2 (1996): 147–230. For a review of the positions advanced on the authorship of the Book of Mormon, see Midgley, “Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon? The Critics and Their Theories,” *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel Reynolds (Provo, Utah: F.A.R.M.S., 1997), 101–39.

10. See, for example, Robert N. Hullinger, *Joseph Smith’s Response to Skepticism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992); Hullinger, *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St. Louis, Mo.: Clayton, 1980); or Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon: Religious Solutions from Columbus to Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986).

11. Hans Kellner, “Introduction: Describing Redescriptions,” in *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 15.

12. A glance at a history of biblical criticism reveals the problem posed by naturalistic assumptions in dealing with the Bible. See, for example, Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia:

Fortress, 1984); or Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

13. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "Preface," *A Religious History of the American People* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 23.

14. Ibid., "Preface to the Image Book Edition," 16–17.

15. Ibid., 17.

16. See especially, Karl Marx, "Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 63–74.

17. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1964).

18. Ahlstrom, "Preface to the Image Book Edition," 15.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 16.

21. Ibid., "Preface," 22.

22. For an account of the corrosive impact of secularized historiography on the faith and identity of Jews, see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

23. For an insightful view by a Roman Catholic of the recent debate over the historicity of the Book of Mormon, see Massimo Introvigne, "The Book of Mormon Wars: A Non-Mormon Perspective," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 1–25; and in a shortened version in *Mormon Identities in Transition*, ed. Douglas J. Davies (London: Cassell, 1996), 25–34.

24. C. S. Lewis, "Religion without Dogma?" in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1970), 134.

25. Ibid.

26. Krentz, 26.

27. Ibid.

28. For examples of such secularized treatments of the Book of Mormon, see the essays contained in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993). The Metcalfe volume has been criticized extensively in the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6, no. 2 (1994), and elsewhere.

29. Such efforts became a rather popular undertaking when Mark Hofmann was busy forging what he claimed were authentic early Mormon documents. For a review of the literature, see Midgley, "The Challenge of Historical Consciousness: Mormon History and the Encounter with Secular Modernity," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, 27

March 1990, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 2:502–51; and Midgley, “The Acids of Modernity and the Crisis in Mormon Historiography,” in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 189–225.

30. For the use of the adjective *naturalistic* in exactly the way it has been used by certain Mormon historians (both in and out of the Church), see, for example, Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 20, 32–34, 37–39, 170, 186–88; Gary R. Habermas and Anthony G. N. Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, ed. Terry L. Miethe (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); and also essays by Stephen T. Davis, “Is it Possible to Know that Jesus was Raised from the Dead?” *Faith and Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (April 1984): 147–59; Gary R. Habermas, “Knowing that Jesus’ Resurrection Occurred: A Response to Stephen Davis,” *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (July 1985): 295–302; Stephen T. Davis, “Naturalism and the Resurrection: A Reply to Gary Habermas,” *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (July 1985): 303–8, among many others that could be cited.

31. Marvin S. Hill, “Secular or Sectarian History? A Critique of *No Man Knows My History*,” *Church History* 43, no. 1 (March 1974): 96, reprinted in *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History*, 83.

32. Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 296. He also argues that Joseph Smith, like Jesus of Nazareth and other founders of religious movements, suffered from manic depression, which explains the religious “genius” behind the founding of religious movements. See Foster, “The Psychology of Religious Genius: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Religious Movements,” *Dialogue* 26, no. 4 (winter 1993): 1–22.

33. *Ibid.*, 297.

34. Jan Shippo, “An ‘Insider–Outsider’ in Zion,” *Dialogue* 15, no. 1 (spring 1982): 154.

35. For a recent expression of this dogma, see Sterling M. McMurrin and L. Jackson Newell, *Matters of Conscience: Conversations with Sterling M. McMurrin on Philosophy, Education, and Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 368–69; and compare with “An Interview with Sterling McMurrin,” *Dialogue* 17, no. 1 (spring 1984): 25; or “The History of Mormonism and Church Authorities: An Interview with Sterling M. McMurrin,” *Free Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (winter 1983–84): 34.

36. D. Michael Quinn’s *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), and John L. Brooke’s *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) are the two most recent books in this genre.

37. For example, a former Mormon historian has claimed that he is “still a Mormon for the same reasons that secular Jews (even the atheists among them) are still

Jewish.” See D. Michael Quinn, “Dilemmas of Feminists & Intellectuals in the Contemporary Church,” *Sunstone* 17, no. 1 (June 1994): 68.

38. For the pejorative use of the label “traditional Mormon history” and the corresponding appropriation of the label “revisionist Mormon history,” see D. Michael Quinn, “Editor’s Introduction,” *The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), vii–xx. See Louis Midgley, *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 13 (1993): 118–21, for a response to Quinn’s ideology in a review of his book that is focused primarily on his tendentious remarks in his “Editor’s Introduction.”

39. See, for example, Marvin S. Hill, “The Historiography of Mormonism,” *Church History* 28, no. 4 (December 1959): 418–19. See also Klaus J. Hansen, “Jan Shippis and the Mormon Tradition,” *Journal of Mormon History* 11 (1984): 135–45.

40. George D. Smith, “Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon,” *Free Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (winter 1983–84): 27; reprinted in *On the Barricades: Religion and Free Inquiry in Conflict*, ed. Robert Basil, Mary Beth Gehrman, and Tim Madigan (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 147. For details on Prometheus Books and the magazine *Free Inquiry*, see Louis Midgley, “Atheists and Cultural Mormons Promote a Naturalistic Humanism,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7, no. 1 (1995): 229–38; and see also Midgley, “George Dempster Smith, Jr., on the Book of Mormon,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): 5–12.

41. George D. Smith, letter to editor, *Seventh East Press*, 8 February 1983, 11 (quoting “An Interview with Sterling McMurrin,” 25).

42. *Ibid.*

43. “An Interview with Sterling McMurrin,” 25; and compare McMurrin, *Matters of Conscience*, 210–11; and Roger D. Launius, “From Old to New Mormon History: Fawn Brodie and the Legacy of Scholarly Analysis of Mormonism,” in Bringhurst, *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History*, 206.

44. Launius, 219.

45. *Ibid.*, 198.

46. For a detailed treatment of “theology,” see Midgley, “Directions that Diverge: ‘Jerusalem and Athens’ Revisited,” *F.A.R.M.S. Review of Books* 11, no. 1 (1999): 58–72.