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“Common Sense” Meets the Book of Mormon

Source, Substance, and Prophetic Disruption

- TERRY L. GIVENS -

 THOMAS O'DEA'S OPINION of the Book of Mormon's importance in Mormonism is evident in his choice to make it the first chapter following his introduction. He spends little more than a page summarizing the Book of Mormon before he immediately turns to the question that seems inevitably to impose itself at the forefront of so many Book of Mormon discussions: how do we explain its origin? Such a preoccupation does not self-evidently present itself; one would not expect to find, and in fact does not find, that accounts of the Qur'an, for instance, typically exhibit the felt burden of “explaining” the revelations that constitute that book of scripture. That the question arises so starkly in the case of the Book of Mormon may have to do with the striking nearness in our past of such claims to supernaturalism—“seeing visions in the age of railways!” as Charles Dickens marveled.

Even though O'Dea, like virtually all non-Mormon scholars who have tackled the subject before and since, could not bracket the problem of the book's origin, the respect and seriousness of intent he accorded Mormons and their book of scripture were certainly historic milestones. O'Dea was able to take the Book of Mormon seriously precisely because he did *not* take seriously Mormon claims of its origin. By matter-of-factly naturalizing the supernatural story of its coming forth, he could consider the problem one of simple environmental influence—a “common-sense” explanation, as he put it.

He quickly dismisses the Spaulding theory of authorship as an anti-Mormon ploy, before rejecting I. Woodbridge Riley's 1902 theory that made “bad ancestry and epilepsy” the catalysts to Smith's visions, on the charge that medical evidence is lacking for the epilepsy. Apparently, he believed

dubious progenitors alone cannot account for spontaneous revelations. Instead, O'Dea follows in the track laid down by Alexander Campbell in 1831. In his rather vehement assault on the Book of Mormon, Campbell characterized the work as a mishmash of

every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years. He decided all the great controversies:—infant baptism, ordination, the trinity, regeneration, repentance, justification, the fall of man, the atonement, transubstantiation, fasting, penance, church government, religious experience, the call to the ministry, the general resurrection, eternal punishment, who may baptize, and even the question of free masonry, republican government and the rights of man. (1832, 85)

With heftier scholarly credentials but a like hostility to Mormonism's founder, Fawn M. Brodie employed the same approach in her influential 1945 biography.¹ She cites the above passage from Campbell approvingly, arguing that "the book can best be explained, not by Joseph's ignorance nor by his delusions, but by his responsiveness to the provincial opinions of his time." The book, she writes in terms that parallel Campbell's, is "absolutely American, . . . an obscure compound of folklore, moral platitude, mysticism, and millennialism" (69, 67). So it is that O'Dea also opts for this "simple common-sense explanation," which he attributes to Fawn M. Brodie rather than its original expositor, Campbell. His characterization of Smith's motives, however, was less hostile than either. True enough, he thinks Smith a deceiver (after slipping into the wrong tense at one point in the "translation," O'Dea writes, Smith had to scramble "to keep from exposing himself before his scribe" [1957, 40]). So it is far from clear, having stripped Smith's *modus operandi* of a supernatural character, exactly what O'Dea might mean by his conclusion that "an atmosphere of religious excitement led [Smith] from necromancy into revelation, from revelation to prophecy, and from prophecy to leadership of an important religious movement" (24).

It is perhaps inevitable that, bidden or unbidden, preconceptions about the origins of a book so thoroughly immersed in supernaturalism and controversy will condition the reading of the text. But by raising the question of origins at the outset, stipulating a naturalistic origin, and then defining it summatively as "an American document" "in content as well as origin" (26), O'Dea (like Brodie) has transformed his whole enterprise in this chapter into an elaboration of, and only of, those Book of Mormon themes that correspond to religious and political concerns of early-nineteenth-century New York. This is lamentable. Not because supernatural origins are precluded,

but because such reductionism impoverishes the text and one's openness to any mystery or surprises it may have yielded under a less constraining paradigm. This is apparent when one considers how robbed one would feel if an otherwise perceptive and astute critic were to apply the same method to *Hamlet*. What would be lost in proving its "origins and content" are comprehended through the "simple common-sense explanation" of its being an Elizabethan document that in a straightforward, unproblematic manner reflects religious and political ideas swirling about in early-seventeenth-century England?

So also is it too simple to call the Book of Mormon "obviously an American work growing in the soil of American concerns" in terms of its "plot" and "patriotism" and "conception of government" (32, 34). Richard Bushman, writing in 1976, argues convincingly that any alleged correspondence between the Book of Mormon themes and nineteenth-century American political culture, though superficially appealing, collapses upon inspection. He locates in political literature of the 1820s three "of the most obvious contemporaneous ideas about government and the American Revolution": revolution as heroic resistance to tyranny, the stimulus of enlightened ideas about human rights, and the merits of (largely Lockean) constitutional principles. The Book of Mormon text, he demonstrates,

was an anomaly on the political scene of 1830. Instead of heroically resisting despots, the people of God fled their oppressors and credited God alone with deliverance. Instead of enlightened people overthrowing their kings in defense of their natural rights, the common people repeatedly raised up kings, and the prophets and the kings themselves had to persuade the people of the inexpediency of monarchy. Despite Mosiah's reforms, Nephite government persisted in monarchical practices, with life tenure for the chief Judges, hereditary succession, and the combination of all functions in one official.

"In view of all this," he concludes, "the Book of Mormon could be pictured as a bizarre creation, a book strangely distant from the time and place of its publication" (17-18).

Even among non-Mormon readers of the text, no consensus has emerged on the question of the Book of Mormon's relationship to Smith's environment. Some critics have continued to ferret out connections to contemporary issues—but they at times see diametrically opposed influences. Like Campbell and Brodie, more recent scholars have drawn attention to the book's engagement with theological issues of contemporary relevance.

Ironically, O'Dea thought it patently obvious that "the doctrine of the book is wholeheartedly and completely Arminian" (1957, 28), whereas Marvin S. Hill follows Brodie in writing, "Theologically the Book of Mormon was a mediating text standing between orthodox Calvinists and emerging Arminians," and he points to "passages which are strongly anti-Universalist" as evidence of "the Calvinistic inclinations in the text" (1989, 21). Even Mormon scholar Thomas G. Alexander agrees in an influential 1980 essay that the Book of Mormon betrays a "pessimistic" assessment of human nature that Smith only gradually moved beyond (24–33). Echoing this appraisal of the Book of Mormon's purported Calvinism, one scholar contrasts it with the radical humanism of Smith's later preaching and asks, referring to a sermon expounding the doctrine of theosis, "Was the Book of Mormon Buried with King Follett?" The same scholar insists that "while human beings are, as some Mormons are fond of repeating, 'gods in embryo' in the sense that they are the spirit offspring of a divine being, the Book of Mormon teaches that humans are also devils in embryo in the sense that, without a savior, they would naturally devolve into diabolical, not divine, beings" (Voros 1987, 15–18). Community of Christ scholar A. Bruce Lindgren cites Helaman 12:4–7, referring to human foolishness, vanity, evil, and "nothingness," as further proof that the book is "pessimistic about human nature" (1986; see also 1983).

Jon Butler, in a different vein, explores frontier cultural continuities with Alma 36. In this conversion narrative, Alma the Younger lapses into three days of unconsciousness, only to be restored three days later, spiritually reborn of God through the mercy of Jesus Christ. Butler writes that "during Methodist 'love-feasts,' some participants fainted." In one recorded case, a man "continued so long, that his flesh grew cold.'... But the man did not die and, like others, was physically revived and spiritually reborn. 'He began to praise God for what he had done for his soul'" (1992, 240). O'Dea likewise notes similarities to the "dignified revivalism of New England" (1957, 28, 40). Other parallels that continue to emerge in environmental discussions include nineteenth-century antimasonry and anti-Catholicism.

The author's view of human nature is not the only point of controversy among theorists of the Book of Mormon's origins. Alexander Campbell was absolutely confident in asserting that "there never was a book more evidently written by one set of fingers" (1831, 93).² Philastus Hurlbut and Eber D. Howe propounded in 1833 that the real author was Solomon Spaulding, whose manuscript Sidney Rigdon reworked with Joseph Smith.³ "The book of Mormon is a bungling and stupid production" ("The Mormons" 1840, 1), wrote one journalist, a "farrago of balderdash," decreed Edmund Wilson

(De Voto 1930, 5; Wilson 1985, 275). Critics have "failed to note the intellectuality of the Book of Mormon," and "there are places where the Book of Mormon rises to impressive heights," complains O'Dea, again following Brodie (1957, 30, 37).⁴ Clearly, O'Dea's treatment, although it represented progress in its tone, enhanced our understanding of the Book of Mormon very little, by remaining within the narrow constraints of a facile environmentalism.

Recognizing the ultimate insufficiency of cultural influences to account for the Book of Mormon taken as a whole, an intrigued observer such as Harold Bloom, perhaps the most famous contemporary (non-Mormon) admirer of Joseph Smith, refers to the prophet as an "authentic religious genius" (1992, 80). Many Mormons would be happy for the compliment. Such a tribute, however, as foremost historian of Mormonism Richard Bushman realizes, is still just another kind of intellectual failure to come to terms with the golden bible. "Genius, by common admission, carries human achievement beyond the limits of simple historical explanation, just as revelation does. To say that the Book of Mormon could only be written by a genius is logically not much different from saying God revealed it. In both cases, we admit that historical analysis fails us" (1996, 69).⁵

At the same time, Bloom does move us beyond the confines of environmentalism, by at least acknowledging there is more here than can be dispatched of by a glance at the Manchester Library holdings. Although he seems more intrigued by the writing Smith later produced purporting to be the "Book of Abraham" than in the Book of Mormon, Bloom (1992) was himself impressed by Smith's uncanny ability to tie into occult and kabbalistic traditions, with no vehicle of transmission apparent—or even plausible—in the immediate cultural context. Other scholars have also, moving beyond Bushman, argued for connections to sources and ideas that are "strangely distant" from, rather than contiguous with, New York folk culture and proximate religious currents. Expanding the search from Smith's neighborhood to the entire Western occult tradition, John Brooke has gone further afield than most in his search for influences and sources. As one review fairly characterizes his study,

Brooke attempts to find hermeticism, Freemasonry, and alchemy in the translation process and text of the Book of Mormon. Brooke searches for any and every thought or act of Joseph Smith and other early Mormons that he can see as related—however vaguely—to hermetic, Masonic, alchemical, or other occultic ideas. He first focuses on ideas of priesthood, mysteries, temples, cosmology, and preexistence.... Joseph's marriage, sex

life, and plural marriages are seen as “replicat[ing] the hermetic concept of conjunctio, the alchemical marriage.” (Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton 1994, 8)

Brooks concedes that the question of how these elements might have been conveyed from “late-sixteenth-century Europe to the New York countryside” in the early nineteenth century is “problematic” (1994, 19).

It is, of course, possible that a genuinely ancient record could appear, shrouded in spurious stories about its recovery. For most readers, however, ancient Israelites in America who kept records on plates of gold are just as incredible as angel messengers and miraculous “interpreters.” O’Dea does not explicitly state why the Book of Mormon does not deserve consideration as ancient history or ancient scripture, but implies that it is the modern resonance of the content—nowhere more baldly in evidence than in its explicit messianism. “The expectations of the Nephites are those of nineteenth-century American Protestants rather than of biblical Hebrews,” he writes, and says there is but little “difference between what a Nephite prophet and a New York revivalist says” (1957, 39). Indeed, Latter-day Saints are even more unabashed about proclaiming the text a pre-Christian testament to Christ today than they were in 1957. Since 1982, the scripture has borne the subtitle “Another Testament of Jesus Christ.”

Perhaps the most that can be offered in this regard is that Book of Mormon writers seem themselves aware of the anomalous nature of their prophecies, always couching them in the context of extraordinary revelation. Lehi preaches the time of the Messiah’s coming apparently based on an inspired dream (1 Nephi 10:2–4). Nephi refers to the coming Messiah as Jesus Christ, “according to . . . the word of the angel of God” (2 Nephi 25:21). His mother’s name, Mary, was likewise made known to King Benjamin “by an angel from God” (Mosiah 3:2–8). Alma knows the Savior shall be born of Mary in Jerusalem, because “the spirit hath said this much unto me” (Alma 7:9), and so on. Still, the Book of Mormon’s Christocentrism is radically pervasive and explicit and detailed, vastly more so than the vague Messianic prophecies of an Isaiah or Psalmist. If the extensive supernaturalism surrounding Joseph’s production of the Book of Mormon is not immediately dissuasive, the pre-Christian Christianity of the Nephites frequently is. Perhaps, since both ultimately rely on an embrace or rejection of highly personalized, extracanonical revelation, one to modern prophets like Joseph Smith and the other to ancient dispersed Israelites, Latter-day Saint apologists have concerned themselves but little with the scripture’s most *prima facie* anachronicity.

As for the other elements of the record amenable to historical investigation, Mormons had before 1957 produced little evidence to lend them particular plausibility. O'Dea wrote at a moment when Mormons were just beginning to apply the tools of archaeology to buttress their belief in the Book of Mormon as an authentic, ancient text. Brigham Young University had created a chair in that discipline in 1945, and a few years later fieldwork began in southeastern Mexico—deemed the heart of Book of Mormon lands by Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) scholars. Thomas Ferguson, an amateur scholar, became a fund-raiser, proponent, and organizer behind the effort to solve "the paramount problem of origins of the great civilizations of Middle America" (Kidder and Ferguson 1996, 43). The solution, he clearly believed, was to be found by corroborating archaeologically the account given in the Book of Mormon. Mormons devoured the products of the effort, such as the 1950 publication by Ferguson and Milton R. Hunter, *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon*. Similar titles quickly followed, but non-Mormon scholars paid no attention, and serious scholars within the church criticized such efforts for doing more harm than good to the cause of Book of Mormon apologetics. O'Dea apparently was oblivious to their efforts, or felt the evidence mustered in such volumes beneath notice.

More serious—and durable work—was being done at this time by Hugh Nibley, whose publications on the Book of Mormon remain the standard for apologetic research. A recent outline of his contributions surveys forty-five topics in which he finds historical corroboration for Book of Mormon themes, practices, and textual elements (McKinlay 2002). From Egyptian etymologies for personal names and the word for "honeybee" (*deseret*) to the motifs of luminous stones and dancing princesses in the Book of Ether and the practice of Olive culture and naming of geographical features, Nibley excavates a host of ancient cultural information to make the Book of Mormon appear naturally congruent with a Middle Eastern setting. His analysis includes comparing Lehi's rhetoric with the *qasida*, or desert poetry, and examining Book of Mormon assemblies in light of new-year rites described in Old World texts. He finds ancient precedents for unusual phraseology (such as "the cold and silent grave, from whence no traveler can return," and the often mentioned "land of Jerusalem") and for the book's introductory and concluding style of colophons. He verifies the historical correctness of Nephi's hunting weapons (bows and slings) and finds a striking etymology for the peculiar word *Hermounts*, a Book of Mormon wilderness infested with wild beasts. In Egypt he locates a district called Hermonthis, named after Month, the Egyptian god "of wild places and things." Ritual games in which life and limb are forfeit, peculiar rites of execution, and hiding up treasures

unto the Lord are all Book of Mormon elements that find Old World antecedents under Nibley's expansive scholarship.

For all his efforts, Nibley found few to pay attention to his work outside Mormon circles. One prominent scholar of Near Eastern studies, though completely unpersuaded by Smith's angel stories, nonetheless agreed with Nibley that one cannot explain away the presence in the Book of Mormon of genuinely Egyptian names, such as Paanchi and Pahoran, in close connection with a reference to the text as written in "reformed Egyptian" (communication of William F. Albright to Grant S. Heward, July 25, 1966, in Tvedtnes, Gee, and Roper 2000, 45). Otherwise, Nibley registered little outside impact.

A few decades after O'Dea wrote, Book of Mormon scholarship gathered new life with the formation of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) in 1979. In the years since, scholars associated with that institute are growing in confidence that "there is mounting up a considerable body of analysis demonstrating that at least something of the strangeness of the Book of Mormon is due to the presence in it of other ancient and complex literary forms which Joseph Smith is highly unlikely to have discovered on his own, and showing as well that its contents are rich and subtle beyond the suspicions of even the vast majority of its most devout readers" (Peterson 1990, xxiii). As even a determined skeptic admits, it is hard to ignore the "striking coincidences between elements in the Book of Mormon and the ancient world, and some notable matters of Book of Mormon style" (Wright 1993, 165n). In a much heralded 1998 paper, two evangelicals, Paul Owen and Carl Mosser, acknowledge that "in recent years the sophistication and erudition of LDS apologetics has risen considerably ... [and] is clearly seen in their approach to the Book of Mormon" (181, 185). As difficult as it may be to accept, "LDS academicians are producing serious research which desperately needs to be critically examined," they insist (189).⁶

John W. Welch (1969) first noted how chiasmus, or inverted parallelism, a poetic structure common in antiquity, turns out to be pervasive in the Book of Mormon. Though it is common, in small doses, to many poets across time, the examples in the Book of Mormon are at times remarkably intricate and prolonged. Donald Parry (1992) and others have focused on many other examples of Hebraic structures in the Book of Mormon. And John L. Sorenson (1996) has made an impressive case, based on both geographical and anthropological approaches, for an ancient American setting for the Book of Mormon, working with some seven hundred geographical references in the

text. Other scholars have followed Nibley in arguing for compelling parallels involving coronation festivals and other cultural practices.⁷

More recent work has involved mapping the possible route of Lehi's family through the Arabian wilderness, and finding a number of striking fits. Candidates for the River of Lemuel have been argued, a general route along the Incense Trail agreed upon, and consensus reached that the point of departure in the verdant land Bountiful "must have been located along the southern coast of Oman" (Kent et al. 1998, 12).⁸ One of the most vocal critics of Book of Mormon historicity has scoffed that archaeologists have no more chance of finding evidence of Book of Mormon place-names "than of discovering the ruins of the bottomless pit described in the book of Revelations [*sic*]." Yet in the 1990s, archaeologists found altars near Sanaa, Yemen, that confirm unequivocally the historicity of a place-name mentioned early in the Book of Mormon ("Nahom"), at the very locale where it should be if the record is authentic.⁹ In this instance, at least, hard archaeological evidence sustains in very focused, dramatic fashion a specific claim made by the Book of Mormon a century and three-quarters ago. As of 2005, researchers at FARMS felt confident enough of the accumulated evidence to produce a film, *Journey of Faith*, that recapitulates the journey of Lehi from Jerusalem to the Arabian Sea.

Others have worked assiduously to establish the plausibility of Israelite settlement of the New World, either directly, by establishing linguistic parallels (such as Brian Stubbs, a published expert on the Uto-Aztecan languages, who claims a high percentage of Semitic connections in both grammar and morphology [Sorenson 2000]), or indirectly, by compiling massive bibliographies of diffusionist evidence (such as John Sorenson and Martin Raish, who published *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans* [1996]). More recently, Sorenson (2006) has collated an impressive array of biological evidence to the same ends.

None of these items, of course, taken singly, constitutes decisive proof that the Book of Mormon is an ancient text. Even their cumulative weight is counterbalanced by what appear to be striking intrusions into the Book of Mormon text of anachronisms, nineteenth-century parallels, and elements that appear to many scholars to be historically implausible and inconsistent with what is known about ancient American cultures. In addition to the echoes of nineteenth-century folk magic, anti-Catholicism, and religious debates, the Book of Mormon entails an array of dilemmas for the believer. Critics have given over, latching onto a number of purported gaffes that turn out to be bull's-eyes: Alma is not a Latin feminine, for example, but

an ancient Hebrew name attested by the Dead Sea Scrolls. The purported “Reformed Egyptian” of the plates does in fact turn out to reflect a genuine mingling of Egyptian and Hebrew cultural traditions in the exilic era, and referring to the “land of Jerusalem” has ancient precedents. The barley mentioned in the Book of Mormon was roundly mocked by critics as recently as 1980 (Scott 1980, 82). By the next decade, a best-selling book referred to a variety of barley as a Native American staple (Diamond 1997, 150).

The most recent development in the Book of Mormon wars has been a flurry of claims that DNA evidence proves the absence of any genetic link between Native American populations and an Israelite heritage. Unfortunately, inflated claims by disaffected Mormons and extensive media exposure have granted a degree of gravity to these allegations far in excess of their potential for scientific merit. Quite simply, DNA would be a relevant tool in the debate only if a number of extraordinary conditions were present. The science can get quite complicated, but the assumptions on which it is based are not. As Michael Whiting (2003), a molecular biologist and member of a scientific review panel for the National Science Foundation, points out, at least ten factors make the hypothesis of American Indian–Israelite connections untestable. Among these are the unlikelihood of the Book of Mormon peoples remaining genetically uncontaminated by any other peoples during their thousand-year presence in this hemisphere. One would also have to ignore the effects of genetic contamination among indigenous populations that doubtless occurred in the fifteen centuries after Book of Mormon history ends. One would also have to know precisely who, among the vast American Indian populations of today, are the descendants of what the Book of Mormon calls “Lamanites.” The very small size of the founding genetic pools and the shifting genetic identity of the Middle Eastern host population also present challenges to experimental validation.

Rebutting such objections, critics point out that the Book of Mormon’s (noncanonical) introduction refers to the American Indians in toto as “the principal descendants of the Lamanites,” and that generations of church leaders and members have asserted the monopoly of Book of Mormon peoples in this hemisphere. At this stage of the debate, it is clear that church teachings, rather than the Book of Mormon itself, are the vulnerable target. As Book of Mormon scholars have been pointing out for generations, the scripture itself nowhere claims that the Jaredites or Lehites established or sustained a presence in the utter absence of other indigenous or subsequently arrived groups. Similarly, the record nowhere imputes to them a hemispheric dominion. In fact, as John L. Sorenson and others argued long

before *DNA* was a buzzword, the actual dominions intimated in the geographical references more nearly approximate the modest size of Palestine than half the globe. As long ago as 1927, Janne M. Sjodahl wrote that "students should be cautioned against the error of supposing that all the American Indians are the descendants of Lehi, Mulek, and their companions" (28), and in 1938 a Church Department of Education study guide for the Book of Mormon told students that "the Book of Mormon deals only with the history and expansion of three small colonies which came to America and it does not deny or disprove the possibility of other immigrations, which probably would be unknown to its writers" (Berrett and Hunter 1938, 48).¹⁰ Finally, the Book of Mormon explicitly makes Lamanite a political and religious, rather than ethnic, designation by the record's conclusion.

This leaves unaddressed, of course, the very real—and problematic—doctrinal and cultural interpretations of the Book of Mormon that still infuse LDS rhetoric and writings. In Mormon popular idiom, *Lamanite* has long meant and continues to mean Native American. In that regard, it may well be that even Book of Mormon devotees can find the DNA debates salutary for necessitating a more careful scrutiny of the textual foundations that support traditional interpretations.

Just as the DNA controversy has focused attention on the parameters of the designation "Lamanite" in ways that make its broad application difficult to sustain, other pressures on conventional Book of Mormon geography (the "hemispheric model") have similarly been followed by a shrinking Book of Mormon stage. Since shortly after O'Dea wrote, scholars at Brigham Young University (BYU) have zeroed in on Mesoamerica as the theater of operations for Book of Mormon history, but it was only with the work of John Sorenson in the 1980s that that model gained general currency.

Narrowing the target solves many problems, but incurs others. At least one objection that so stymied formidable Book of Mormon scholar B. H. Roberts would have been largely obviated by claiming a limited model of Book of Mormon settlement. "How to explain the immense diversity of Indian languages, if all are supposed to be relatively recent descendants of Lamanite origin?" asked a correspondent.¹¹ If the clan of Lehi is not the source of an entire hemispheric civilization, and the Book of Mormon not the record of half the globe's history for a thousand years, then a great many objections are indeed seen to be straw men. Similarly, the daunting population problems are potentially resolved if Book of Mormon peoples are seen as coexisting with and occasionally assimilating other contemporaneous groups. On the other hand, by locating with geographical precision the alleged locale for the book's millennium-long history, there is no place to hide.

John E. Clark is one anthropologist who believes the fifty years since O'Dea have brought more than a redefinition of the Book of Mormon's scope. "Only during the last fifty" years, he writes, "has American archaeology been capable of addressing issues of history and generating reliable facts" (2005, 87). Most impressive, he believes, is the congruence of time lines for the major population groups in the Book of Mormon and in Mesoamerica. The Olmec civilization, not dated until a decade after O'Dea wrote, is now considered to have flourished until the fifth century B.C., just when the Jaredite people were annihilated. The largest upland and lowland Mayan cities were similarly destroyed or abandoned at the same time the Nephite civilization came to its catastrophic end in the fifth century A.D. Clark frankly acknowledges that many problems remain unsolved, but insists the trend is toward fewer, not more, discrepancies between the record and historical knowledge. Evaluating sixty criticisms of three nineteenth-century works, for instance, Clark finds that 60 percent of them have been resolved in favor of the Book of Mormon. He mentions as examples Old World steel swords and metal plates and New World cement, barley, and writing systems.

Clearly, many anachronisms and improbabilities remain. "The most frequently mentioned deficiencies of the book," Clark continues, "concern the lack of hard evidence in the New World for the right time periods of precious metals, Old World animals and plants and Book of Mormon place names and personal names. . . . Other probable items await full confirmation, including horses, Solomon-like temples, scimitars, large armies, a script that may qualify as reformed Egyptian, and the two hundred years of Nephite peace" (95).

Smith was himself confident that time would vindicate his claims regarding the Book of Mormon. "We can not but think the Lord has a hand in bringing to pass his strange act, and proving the Book of Mormon true in the eyes of all the people," he wrote (*Times and Seasons* 1842, 921). "Surely 'facts are stubborn things.' It will be as it ever has been, the world will prove Joseph Smith a true prophet by circumstantial evidence" (923). So far, however, it may be that historical approaches are more effective tools in the hands of critics than believers. This is not necessarily because the balance of evidence weighs more heavily in the former's favor. Rather, it is because supporting historical research can do little to ground or establish religious faith that is not already present, whereas contrary historical evidence can do much to disable interest and serious investigation on the part of the uncommitted. History as theology is indeed perilous, as Grant McMurray,

past president of the Community of Christ, has warned¹²—and his denomination has found a more comfortable and uncontroversial niche in Protestantism by retreating from foundational historical narratives about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. The same impulse led him to say, upon his succession, that his members needed to move from being "a people with a prophet" to being a "prophetic people" (Stack 1996, D1).

The Latter-day Saints, however, have opted to make the prophet Joseph Smith—and the particular history he related—not just an essential part of Mormon theology, but *the* foundation of Mormonism's theology. Retreat from that commitment is not a possibility in a church and tradition that has erected its entire doctrinal edifice as a logically interconnected series of historical propositions, running from Smith's visitation by embodied deities in the Sacred Grove through his translation of actual gold plates to the receipt of priesthood keys by a whole series of resurrected beings.

The Book of Mormon's place as LDS scripture is constituted in part by the role it has consistently played as both the evidence and the very ground of Joseph Smith's prophetic calling, a divine sign of the opening of a new dispensation that he and he alone was authorized to initiate, the ground and evidence and physical embodiment of a rift in heaven through which angels and authority and revelations poured forth in torrents. It is not what the Book of Mormon contains, which Mormons value, but what it enacts. And that miraculous enactment *is* its history. This history began with prophets inscribing their words on gold plates two and a half millennia ago; becomes a long history of providential preservation; includes divine assurances and prophecies of the manner, timing, and agency by which it would be committed to a future generation; and culminates as a marvelous work and a wonder, whispering out of the dust, in Isaiah's words, delivered up to Joseph Smith by a messenger from the presence of God, and translated by means of priestly oracles that attest to his role as seer and revelator, the record itself testifying of, and embodying, and provoking millions to experience personally the principle of dialogic revelation—all this is what the Book of Mormon means to a Latter-day Saint.

"Christianity," Arthur Schopenhauer notes, "has this peculiar disadvantage of not being, like other religions, a pure *doctrine*, but is essentially and mainly a *narrative or history*, a series of events . . . ; and this very history constitutes the dogma, belief in which leads to salvation" (1974, 369). If this is true of Christianity in general, it is doubly true of Mormonism in particular. It is therefore hard to bracket the book's claims to historical facticity when those claims are both integral to the religious faith of Mormons and the warp and woof of the record. In this latter regard, the Book of Mormon

is much more like the book of Exodus or Acts than the Psalms or Sermon on the Mount.

What can and should be done is to reshift the focus from what the book is to what it enacts. To reframe the question, "is the Book of Mormon true scripture?" to become, "how does new scripture come to be constituted?" Ask not what truth it contains, but what truths it reveals. The irony of the search for a common ground where believers and skeptics, the devout and the curious, and academics of any persuasion can find agreement is that the common ground has always been quite obvious. From the fulminations of the Baptist *Religious Herald* editorialist who confessed in 1840, "We have never seen a copy of the book of Mormon," and then proceeded to damn it unreservedly as a "bungling and stupid production" ("The Mormons" 1840, 1) to the generations of Mormon converts who have testified to its truthfulness, the key truth and point of consensus about the Book of Mormon have been the same and are revealed in O'Dea's own comic but potent insight. "The Book of Mormon," he writes, "has not been universally considered by its critics [or its followers!] as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it" (1957, 26).

Whether by guile or by inspiration, Smith unarguably produced something more momentous than a pastiche of biblical verses and nineteenth-century cultural flotsam and jetsam. O'Dea rightly appreciated that the Mormons were effectively reenacting in the "conditions of nineteenth-century America the experience of the biblical Hebrews" (O'Dea and Aviad 1983, 86). But he failed—and this was a major failing—to comprehend the significance of the Book of Mormon as a reenactment, and hence demystification and radical reconceptualization, of the very notion of sacred scripture. To reduce the Book of Mormon to the uncomplicated reworking (by "a normal person living in an atmosphere of religious excitement") of a few "basic themes," as O'Dea denominates them (1957, 24), Arminian ideas from here, a little anticlericalism there, with some dashes of New England revivalism, is entirely to miss the essence of the book's phenomenal power to instill discipleship and to incite hatred, to found a major religious tradition and to incite hostility, opposition, and displacement. The Book of Mormon embodies the principle laid down by William Cantwell Smith and William A. Graham, and endorsed by Shlomo Biderman: "The element of content is not the major factor in establishing scripture.... Because of the enormous diversity of what is said in scripture, it cannot be defined or characterized by its content" (1995, 12–13). Rather, he writes, "to understand scripture is to understand the conditions under which a group of texts has gained authority over the lives of people and has been incorporated into human activi-

ties of various important kinds" (50). Joseph Smith understood, as did his disciples and detractors, that scripture is what is written by prophets and that what prophets produce is scripture. The Book of Mormon was a sign of Smith's claim to prophet status, even more emphatically and concretely than was his claim to holy visitations from God and Christ and receipt of priesthood keys from John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John. The latter were portents and indications of his call; the former was the very execution and evidence of the office.

What Joseph produced was, of course, of "enormous diversity": migrations and genealogies and sermons and wars and prophecies and midrash and allegories and details on coinage, horticulture, and military tactics. Ultimately, however, the diversity was daunting, but a distraction. It was the book's transgression of boundaries and limits through a series of paradoxical displacements that constituted his real work of prophetic disruption. The Book of Mormon affirmed the Bible's status as scripture, even as it undermined it. "These last records," the book prophesied of itself, "shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb." But as Nephi reveals in his next sentence, to "establish" the truth of the Bible actually entails establishing its insufficiency. "[These records] shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them" (1 Nephi 13:39-40). Even as it affirms "the gospel of Jesus Christ" and guarantees its restoration in purity, the Book of Mormon demolishes the Bible's monopoly on its articulation: "I shall speak unto the Jews and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the Nephites and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it" (2 Nephi 29:12).

It testifies to Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, then explodes their sublime historical uniqueness by reenacting Christ's ministry and ascension in a New World setting. Similarly, the book affirms Jehovah's covenants with Israel, even as it specifies America as a separate "land of promise" and then chronicles a whole series of portable Zions founded and abandoned in successive waves.

Such multiple disruptions galvanized or offended those who knew the Book of Mormon or its message, but they were the unmistakable focus of proselytizing and criticism alike. As such, the Book of Mormon revealed a great deal—and still does—about the boisterous interplay of democratic yearnings and covenantal elitism; of visionary utterance with its promise and danger; of the longing for religious tradition, stability, and boundaries; and of the appeal of religious dynamism and exceptionalism. The Book of

Mormon, in terms of origin and production, may still be a conundrum for the majority who approach it. But it may serve much more effectively than it has as a lens to better understand the conceptual universe it both engaged and provoked, and to affect the hearts and minds of those who cannot read it with indifference.

NOTES

1. Brodie's was by no measure an attempt at objective history. In her own words, though raised a Latter-day Saint, she had become "convinced before I ever began writing that Joseph Smith was not a true Prophet." Confessing afterward to resentment at having been "conned" by the church, she set out to account for "the whole problem of [Joseph's] credibility" (1975, 79).

2. A useful overview of Book of Mormon critics, with a lively rebuttal, is the nine-part series by Hugh Nibley, "'Mixed Voices': A Study on Book of Mormon Criticism," first published in the *Improvement Era* (May–June 1959) and reprinted in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (1989).

3. Hurlbut first proposed the connection, which Howe then elaborated in print as *Mormonism Unveiled* (1834).

4. Though considering the Book of Mormon an imposture from first to last, Brodie also acknowledged its "elaborate design" and "coherently spun narrative" revealing "a measure of learning and a fecund imagination" (1945, 68–69.)

5. Compare Rodney Stark's criticism of Max Weber: "When Weber wrote that 'We shall understand "prophet" to mean a purely individual bearer of charisma,' he said nothing more than that charismatics have charisma" (1999, 304).

6. James White is an evangelical who does not share Owen and Mosser's respect for the work at FARMS. An author himself of anti-Mormon works, White (1996) provides some anecdotal evidence to support his claim that FARMS scholarship is at times smug, ad hominem, and misapplied. Of this article, Mosser and Owen say it is "nothing more than straw man argumentation" (1998, 202). The only other example of an attempt to refute Mormon scholarship they can identify is *Behind the Mask of Mormonism: From Its Early Schemes to Its Modern Deceptions* by John Ankerberg and John Weldon (1992), which they dismiss as "ugly, unchristian, and misleading" (203).

7. Nibley first cast the Benjamin speech as an ancient year-rite festival in 1957. See Nibley 1988.

8. An overview of Lehi's trail is given in Brown 2002.

9. The altar inscription is "NHM." Interpolating the correct vowels with certainty is not possible. However, it is certain that what Smith spelled as "Nahom" would have been rendered "NHM."

10. The limited geography model centered in Mesoamerica was originally put forth by a Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now called Community of

Christ) researcher, Louis E. Hill, in two books: *Geography of Mexico and Central America from 2234 B.C. to 421 A.D.* (1917) and *Historical Data from Ancient Records and Ruins of Mexico and Central America* (1919). It was widely introduced to Latter-day Saints by Jesse A. and Jesse N. Washburn beginning in the 1930s.

11. The question, posed by one “Mr. Couch,” was passed on by W. E. Riter to James E. Talmage, August 22, 1921, in Roberts 1992, 35.

12. Grant McMurray made this statement in his keynote address at the Mormon History Association annual meeting, Kirtland, Ohio, May 22, 2003.

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