# MAPPING BOOK OF MORMON HISTORICITY DEBATES—PART I

## A GUIDE FOR THE OVERWHELMED

*By John-Charles Duffy*

BOOK OF MORMON "HISTORICITY" REFERS to the claim that the Book of Mormon is an authentic translation of an ancient volume of scripture. Whether or not one believes the Book of Mormon to be historical in this sense is maybe the most fundamental question affecting one's relationship to Mormon faith and the LDS Church. Volumes upon volumes have been written on Book of Mormon historicity issues.

This article is the first in a two-part series that orients readers to the historicity question by "mapping" it in different ways. This first part contains three sections:

I. MAPPING THE HISTORY OF THE DEBATES: A summary of how the historicity debates have developed from the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830 to the beginning of the twenty-first century. This section throws light on historical forces that have shaped Latter-day Saints' views on historicity and that have affected the degree of tolerance in the Church for differing views.

II. MAPPING THE ARGUMENTS: A highly condensed overview of the many arguments that have been made for and against historicity. Written like an encyclopedia entry or bibliographic essay, it may be most helpful as a reference source, pointing you to additional reading.

III. MAPPING THE POSITIONS: A guide to the many different positions that LDS and former LDS individuals have adopted toward Book of Mormon historicity and its implications for LDS faith and church activity. This section shows that Mormons' thinking about historicity has been much more diverse than a simple mapping of the issue as "pro versus con" would suggest.

In Part Two, to be published in the next issue, I map the historicity question sociologically—examining the social dynamics that sustain or alter people's beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity. There I suggest that arguments made for and against historicity are actually not the prime factor in forming a person's beliefs about historicity: relationships with other people are more decisive.

### NOTES AND DISCLAIMERS

*About labels*: Labeling the parties in the debates is difficult because labels tend to be loaded. For convenience, I use the terms orthodox and apologist to refer to those who believe in Book of Mormon historicity, and I use the terms skeptic and revisionist to refer to people who either question or reject historicity. Those I call skeptics or revisionists may or may not believe that the Book of Mormon is in some sense scriptural. These labels are intended to be neutral.

*About references:* To aid readers in locating sources for further reading, I use parenthetical references in place of footnotes. Use the bibliography at the end of the article to locate sources by author's last name and the year of publication.

*About testimony:* This mapping is intended to be neutral toward the debates; the article is not an apologetic either for or

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against Book of Mormon historicity. Different readers might approach this article for different reasons. Some may have a purely academic interest, while other readers may be seeking to resolve urgent religious doubts about Book of Mormon historicity.

To readers who may be examining historicity because their faith is at stake, I reiterate the importance of testimony. Any position that embraces the Book of Mormon as scripture—whether or not it regards the Book of Mormon as "historical"—is an act of faith. And according to LDS teaching, faith cannot rest on intellectual conviction alone. It must rest on testimony—on personal experiences that convince readers God is working in their lives through the Book of Mormon. This means that rational arguments or evidence in favor of historicity do not provide sufficient reason for concluding that the Book of Mormon is true. More is needed: a limbic, existential witness to the soul.

The scriptures teach us that the process of obtaining personal knowledge of the truth involves pondering and studying things out in our minds (Moroni 10:3–5; D&C 9:7–9). I hope the information in this framing article can help readers grappling with Book of Mormon historicity to ponder and "study out" the various issues involved. However, from an LDS point of view, one must weigh the issues intellectually as part of a broader process of seeking truth through prayer and examining one's most deeply rooted feelings.

## I. MAPPING THE HISTORY OF THE DEBATES

THIS SECTION OFFERS an overarching narrative of Book of Mormon historicity debates from 1830 to the present, meant to underscore that these debates do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, they are shaped by social developments such as the expansion of higher education or the advent of the Internet. In addition, they can be compared to debates about science, history, and the authority of scripture occurring elsewhere on the American religious landscape, especially among Protestants. Recognizing those connections illuminates the political dimensions of the historicity debates—that is, we can see how the debates worked to privilege and exclude certain groups or outlooks at particular junctures of history.

### Nineteenth-century polemics

THROUGHOUT THE NINETEENTH century, apologists and skeptics alike assumed that the Book of Mormon's authenticity was synonymous with its historicity. The notion that the book could in some sense be authentic scripture without being historical did not emerge until the twentieth century, after some Mormon scholars had been influenced by modernist or liberal trends in Christian theology. Indeed, not until the twentieth century was the term "historicity" used to frame arguments for or against the Book of Mormon.

The first published criticisms of the Book of Mormon dismissed it as a product of imposture and superstition, emphasizing Smith's involvement in magical treasure hunting.

However, the account of the book's origins most often repeated by nineteenth-century skeptics was the Spaulding theory (Kirkham 1959; Midgley 1997), which accused Smith of plagiarizing the majority of the Book of Mormon from a contemporary romance penned by Solomon Spaulding (more on this in the section, "Mapping the Arguments"). Early critic Alexander Campbell (1831) argued against the Book of Mormon on the basis of internal evidence, alleging contradictions with the Bible (such as placing Jesus' birth in Jerusalem) and the anachronism of setting New Testament preaching and nineteenth-century theological controversies in Old Testament times.

Book of Mormon apologetics in the nineteenth century developed along essentially three lines. First, apologist offered the testimonials of the Three and Eight Witnesses to support Joseph Smith's claim about the book's origins. Second, apologists appealed to the authority of the Bible, whose historical authenticity they took for granted, by citing biblical passages as prophesies of the Book of Mormon. Orson Pratt's *Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (1850) represents this approach. Third, beginning within Smith's lifetime, native ruins such as the Eastern Woodland mounds and newly discovered Mesoamerican cities were cited as evidence for Book of Mormon civilizations (Givens 2002). These three approaches—appeals to the witnesses, to the Bible, and to evidence drawn from Native American cultures—persisted in apologetics authored by General Authorities of the early- to mid-twentieth century, such as B. H. Roberts (1909), James E. Talmage (1924), and LeGrand Richards (1958).

### Modernism and early 20th-century Mormon assimilation

AT THE TIME the Book of Mormon was published, belief in the historicity of the Bible was the culturally dominant view in the United States. This was true despite the skepticism of deists, of whom Thomas Paine was the most notorious, and despite trained biblical scholars' awareness of problems with textual transmission and translation (Gutjahr 1999). Beginning in the 1870s, however, American Protestantism came increasingly under the influence of theological modernism, which embraced higher criticism of the Bible and evolutionary models of religion. Modernists regarded much of the Bible as mythic, not historical, and they looked to the Bible's most advanced ethical teachings as its enduring message (W. Hutchinson 1976). Controversies over modernism polarized Protestants from the 1880s to the 1920s, culminating in a split between fundamentalists and the mainline that has endured to the present.
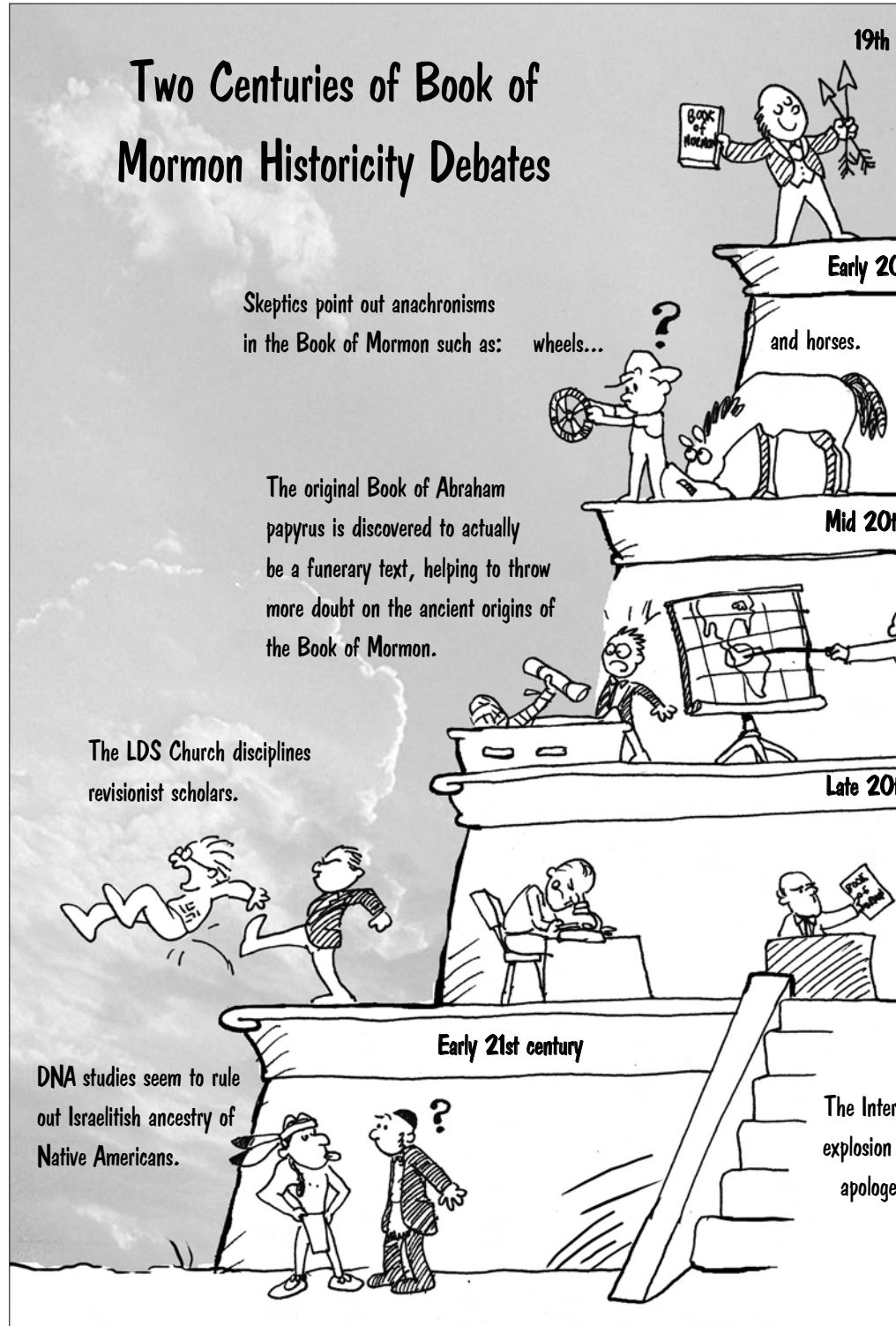
Culturally isolated and politically besieged in the Intermountain West, late nineteenth-century Mormons were distanced from modernist controversies and their implications for Book of Mormon historicity. However, modernist influences entered the Church during the 1910s–1930s, when the Church Educational System (CES) developed curricula for its seminaries and institutes modeled after religion courses at Protestant institutions and sent instructors to receive profes-

sional training at the University of Chicago Divinity School. As a result, a number of BYU, seminary, and institute teachers during the first half of the twentieth century evidently did not regard the Book of Mormon as historical; some apparently did not even regard it as scripture. They focused instead on the New Testament, ethics, and practical Christian living. The anecdotal nature of the evidence makes it difficult to reliably gauge how widespread modernist influence was, but see Barlow (1991), McMurrin and Jackson (1996), and Reynolds (1999) for indications that the influence was significant.

Modernist influences in Mormonism coincided with the period that sociologist Armand Mauss (1994) characterizes as post-Manifesto assimilation. This was the beginning of the mainstreaming of Mormonism. Especially after the First World War, young Mormons began to leave Utah, obtaining education for professional employment and settling down on the West and East Coasts. Higher education and integration into the larger American culture led to their diminished commitment to traditional LDS beliefs. Mauss's study does not provide data about belief in Book of Mormon historicity, but he does report that by mid-century, less than 65% of LDS Church members surveyed in San Francisco believed that Jesus was divine, less than 60% believed that Joseph Smith saw God, and a little over 50% believed that the Church president was God's only prophet. The numbers were higher for members living in Salt Lake City (85%, 78%, and 74% respectively) but still low by late twentieth-century standards. Given these trends, it seems likely that a substantial minority of Latter-day Saints up through the mid-twentieth century were not committed to Book of Mormon historicity. Evidently their commitment to the Church had other foundations.

In addition to modernism, early twentieth-century anthropology also posed challenges to Book of Mormon historicity. Theories about Native Americans' Israelite origins, which had enjoyed credibility among knowledge elites in Joseph Smith's day, were repudiated by anthropologists and archaeologists operating within new canons of scientific authority. Skeptics could now invoke this authority to charge the Book of Mormon with anachronisms such as those B. H. Roberts (1985) confronted in the 1920s: no horses, no steel, the impossibility of Native American languages evolving from a common origin in so little time. And Mormons, young pro-



Two Centuries of Book of Mormon Historicity Debates

Skeptics point out anachronisms in the Book of Mormon such as: wheels... and horses.

The original Book of Abraham papyrus is discovered to actually be a funerary text, helping to throw more doubt on the ancient origins of the Book of Mormon.

The LDS Church disciplines revisionist scholars.

DNA studies seem to rule out Israelitish ancestry of Native Americans.

19th

Early 20

Mid 20t

Late 20

Early 21st century

The Inter
explosion
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fessionalized Mormons especially, were increasingly likely to come into contact with such challenges. Some believers in historicity responded to scientific accounts of the peopling of the Americas by giving nuance to traditional LDS understandings, granting that other peoples could also have settled in the New World and beginning to develop limited, rather than hemispheric, Book of Mormon geographies (Roper 2003, 2004).
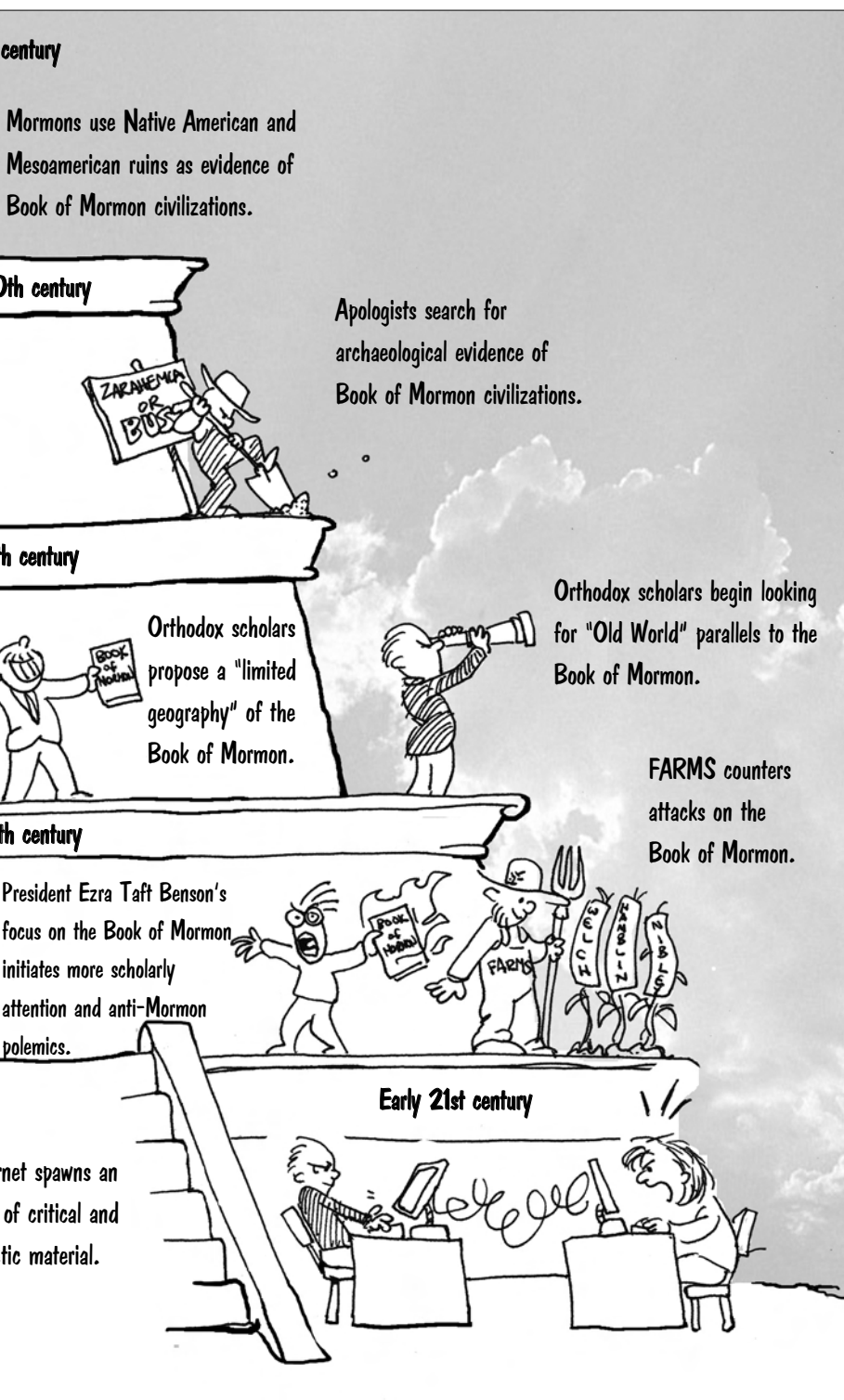
*Retrenchment and mid 20th-century apologetics*

process included selectively recruiting more orthodox instructors, transferring modernist personnel into less influential positions, and interviewing teachers about their beliefs, thus pressuring skeptics to resign (Mauss 1994; Reynolds 1999). This retrenchment process was comparable to Protestant fundamentalists' efforts, decades earlier, to regain control of their denominations; but where Protestant fundamentalists had failed, orthodox Mormons succeeded.
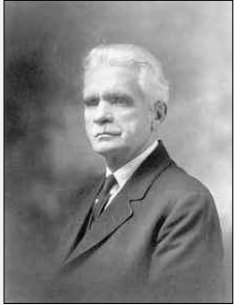
By the 1960s, modernism had been effectively silenced in the CES. The authoritative LDS position was that the Book of Mormon is either historical or worthless. Mormonism's most prominent scriptorians from the 1950s to 1970s—Joseph Fielding Smith, Bruce R. McConkie, LeGrand Richards, and Mark E. Petersen—resembled Protestant fundamentalists in their views on the historicity of the Bible, which they extended into understanding the Book of Mormon as a hemispheric history (Mauss 1994). Another figure with affinities to Protestant fundamentalism, although at a more sophisticated level, was Sidney B. Sperry, a Chicago-trained biblical scholar teaching in the BYU Religion Department. Like fundamentalist or evangelical biblical scholars, Sperry rejected higher criticism. Where historical-critical scholarship on the Bible raised challenges to Book of Mormon historicity (such as positing a date for the authorship of certain chapters in the Book of Isaiah too late for those chapters to have appeared on the brass plates), Sidney argued, to the contrary, that the Book of Mormon actually provided evidence for the historicity of the Bible.

The period when Protestant-style fundamentalism gained ascendancy in Mormonism was also the high point for the use of New World archaeology in Book of Mormon apologetics. The first organized venture to uncover archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon had been launched in 1900 by BYU president Benjamin Cluff (Givens 2002). A half-century later, Thomas Ferguson founded a New World Archaeological Foundation that conducted digs in Mexico with LDS Church funding and was eventually absorbed into BYU, though without an overtly apologetic mission (Larson 1996). Ferguson lacked formal training in archaeology, as did Milton R. Hunter and Paul R. Cheesman, whose New World archaeology-based apologetics were widely received among Latter-day Saints and even used as missionary tools. However, the work of the New World Archaeological Foundation was credible thanks to the involvement of credentialed LDS archaeologists. These scholars were among the expanding population of Latter-day Saints, and Americans generally, who pursued higher education in the decades following the Second World War (Mauss 1994).

The most high-profile mid-twentieth century challenge to

THE MODERNIST INFLUENCE in CES deeply alarmed J. Reuben Clark, counselor in the First Presidency, whose 1938 address, "The Charted Course of the Church in Education," insisted that Book of Mormon historicity was fundamental to LDS faith. Clark's address marked the beginning of a decades-long process of bringing CES under orthodox control. This

# DID B. H. ROBERTS LOSE FAITH IN BOOK OF MORMON HISTORICITY?

IN 1909, B. H. Roberts published an extensive apologetic for the Book of Mormon. A little over a decade later, Roberts was asked to respond to objections about historical anachronism—e.g., reference to horses and steel raised by a young LDS man who had been discussing the book with a non-Mormon living in Washington DC. In the process of composing answers, Roberts became convinced that the scientific case against historicity was stronger than he had realized. He subsequently decided that parallels to Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* also posed a pressing challenge. Roberts laid out the problems he saw in two documents he wrote for Church leaders during the 1920s. Roberts expressed disappointment that leaders responded simply by bearing their testimonies of the Book of Mormon; he protested that they did not grasp the inadequacy of the Church's apologetic defenses (Roberts 1985).

Researchers have disagreed over how Roberts's own faith in Book of Mormon historicity was affected by the arguments he encountered. George D. Smith (1984, 2002) contends that Roberts became ambivalent, expressing private doubts about Book of Mormon historicity. A key piece of evidence for this interpretation is a journal entry reporting that near the end of his life, Roberts told a former missionary he had come to favor a "psychological explanation" of the plates as having a "subjective," not "objective," existence in Smith's mind (in Roberts 1985, 23). Critics of this interpretation point to the testimonies of the Book of Mormon that Roberts bore until the end of his life and to a statement in which he denied that the arguments he was presenting against Book of Mormon historicity expressed his own conclusions. In this view, Roberts was playing devil's advocate to help strengthen Book of Mormon apologetics (Madsen 1982; Madsen and Welch 1985; D. Peterson 1997b).

What B. H. Roberts concluded about the Book of Mormon has excited considerable attention because of the symbolic significance of a General Authority losing faith in historicity. If Roberts did become a closet skeptic, LDS revisionists might point to him as precedent for asserting their own right to a place in the Church. More aggressive detractors could paint him as a former Book of Mormon apologist who recanted once he more carefully considered the evidence.

Joseph Smith's prophetic claims, including Book of Mormon historicity, was Fawn Brodie's much reprinted biography, *No Man Knows My History*, first published in 1945. And the most famous rebuttal to Brodie's biography is Hugh Nibley's *No, Ma'am, That's Not History* (1946). In the decades that followed, Nibley employed his professional training in classics to develop an alternative approach to Book of Mormon apologetics that by century's end had overshadowed New World archaeology: drawing parallels between the Book of Mormon and Old World antiquity. Because his work inspired scholars who later orbited around FARMS, Nibley is arguably the single most influential LDS apologist of the twentieth century, perhaps in all of Mormon history to date.

### Late 20th-century controversies

BY THE LATE twentieth century, American Christianity had been polarized into a divide between "conservatives" and "liberals." Sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow (1988) attributes this polarization to the expansion of higher education after the Second World War and especially after the 1960s, when baby boomers reached college age. Because higher education tends to liberalize people's beliefs and attitudes, the increase in the proportion of college-educated church members divided denominations along educational lines. The more highly educated (a category that included clergy) adopted liberalized attitudes on issues ranging from civil rights, to the Vietnam War, to gender and sexuality. Protestant fundamentalists, too, participated in higher education in greater numbers, resulting in the emergence of a new class of fundamentalists—or "evangelicals," as they came to be known—who, though still conservative, were more moderate than the old-school fundamentalists. One sign of this moderation was that evangelical biblical scholars came to embrace more nuanced understandings of biblical infallibility that stood in not quite so strong tension with the historical-critical scholarship descended from the higher criticism (Noll 1991).

Although liberalization was not as widespread in late twentieth-century Mormonism as it was within mainline Christian denominations, increased participation in higher education did produce a controversial cohort of liberal LDS intellectuals, while at the same time moderating Mormonism's more fundamentalistic elements. This increase in Mormon college-goers after the Second World War produced what Armand Mauss has called "the most visible grass-roots generation of intellectuals that Mormonism had ever seen." Mauss observes further that the generation following that one, the young adults of the 1980s and 1990s, yielded "an even larger (and perhaps somewhat more strident) intellectual contingent, including, for the first time, many feminist intellectuals" (1994, p. 170). Mauss's first generation produced what came to be known as the "new Mormon history," the movement that made "historicity" a key term in debates about the authenticity of Mormon faith. The second generation became locked in what one observer dubbed "the Book of Mormon wars" of the early 1990s (Introvigne 1996). Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first

century, a third generation is coming of age in the midst of what has been called "the DNA controversy."

*The new Mormon history and debates over historicity*

THE LABEL "NEW Mormon history" was coined at the end of the 1960s to signal a trend among a new generation of professional LDS historians. These scholars wrote histories of Mormonism that sidestepped questions about the historicity of Mormonism's supernatural claims—such as the translation of the Book of Mormon—in an attempt to transcend pro- and anti-Mormon polemics. This aspect of their work became controversial, however, because both sympathizers (e.g., Shipps 1987) and critics (e.g., Honey and Peterson 1991) suspected that new Mormon historians were not actually convinced that LDS faith claims were historical. If this was true, most new Mormon historians were circumspect about their doubts. However, erstwhile church historian Leonard Arrington (1985), who stood at the center of the new Mormon history, openly declared that he did not believe the Book of Mormon needed to be historical to have religious significance. Debates over the naturalistic approach of the new Mormon history, launched by BYU political scientists Louis Midgley and David Bohn, helped establish "historicity" as a prominent term in LDS intellectuals' parlance.

In the interest of context, it is worth noting that the recovery, in the late 1960s, of fragments of the papyri from which Joseph Smith claimed to have translated the Book of Abraham, and the discovery that these papyri were funerary texts, probably contributed to the retreat from the historicity of scripture among some LDS intellectuals. Even some orthodox intellectuals have felt pressured to entertain theories that would let the Book of Abraham remain scriptural without being a genuine translation from the papyrus (see, for example, Blomberg and Robinson 1997, p. 65).

Also worth noting is that during the 1960s, intellectuals in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, with whom LDS scholars were building bridges, began to question Book of Mormon historicity as a result of absorbing historical-critical biblical scholarship and liberal Protestant theology. Because RLDS revisionists, unlike their LDS counterparts, held positions in church education and high church leadership, today's Community of Christ has retreated farther from historicity than has the LDS Church (Midgley 1993; Russell 2003).

*The Book of Mormon wars*

IN THE EARLY to mid-1980s, a confluence of several factors prompted the emergence of a Book of Mormon apologetic movement unprecedented in its vigor and professional quality. First, the emphasis placed on the Book of Mormon during the presidency of Ezra Taft Benson increased the need to defend the book's authenticity and invited orthodox scholars to help the Saints draw new insights from the book. Second, anti-Mormon apologetics by fundamentalist countercultists inten-

sified at the end of the 1970s, prompted by the increased visibility of Mormons outside the Intermountain West and the fundamentalists' uncomfortable realization that Mormons resembled them in cultural values and therefore might be mistaken for true Christians (Shipps 2000). Third, documents forged by Mark Hofmann, and bona fide historical research prompted by those forgeries (e.g., research on Joseph Smith and folk magic), lent credence to revisionist accounts of Book of Mormon origins. Fourth, junior apostles Neal A. Maxwell and Dallin H. Oaks, both former university administrators who were less suspicious or dismissive of professional scholarship than some older colleagues among the Twelve, encouraged BYU faculty to publish work that would defend the Church from critics. Fifth, the appointment of FARMS founder John Welch to the BYU faculty facilitated the development of a network of orthodox scholars who could use FARMS publications to reach an LDS audience.

Many of these scholars were dedicated to Nibley's "Old World parallels" approach to Book of Mormon apologetics. They held professional credentials that previous generations of apologists had lacked, and they therefore recognized the inadequacies, by academic standards, of popular apologetic appeals in areas such as New World archaeological evidences. Like evangelical Protestants, with whom orthodox LDS scholars increasingly interacted in the late twentieth century, the new apologists represented a more moderate form of orthodoxy than did the fundamentalistic scripturians of mid-century. Orthodox scholars were willing to revise traditional views to reduce tension with modern scholarship, such as promoting a limited geography for the Book of Mormon. Also like evangelical Protestants, however, orthodox LDS scholars dissented from the philosophical naturalism that had come to dominate the modern academy, insisting instead on the historicity of supernatural claims made in the scriptures (Duffy 2003).

Around the same time—the late 1970s through the 1980s—more liberal LDS intellectuals were raising challenges to orthodoxy, on several fronts, that were radical by comparison with the cautious liberalism of someone like Leonard Arrington. These new liberals included feminists and gay advocates in addition to a class of intellectuals who were dubbed "revisionists." Revisionists not merely sidestepped but argued against the historicity of the Book of Mormon and parts of the Bible, as well as against the claim that the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Translation were actual translations of ancient texts. Revisionists also challenged canonical histories of the Restoration by citing research documenting changes in Joseph Smith's accounts of the First Vision and his involvement with magical treasure digging. Some revisionists continued to affirm LDS sacred texts as scripture in ways comparable to liberal Christian understandings of the Bible; others appeared to adopt a secular outlook. The existence of independent Mormon forums—notably the Mormon History Association, *Dialogue*, SUNSTONE magazine and the Sunstone Symposium, and Signature Books—allowed revisionists to publicize their arguments to an extent that would not have been possible earlier.

Never before had so large a group of LDS intellectuals so openly dissented from orthodox understandings of scripture and revelation while continuing to affirm Church membership. One should not overestimate how widespread disbelief in historicity was: a 1984 poll of *Dialogue* readers, whom one might expect to represent a more liberal contingent of Mormons, still found that two-thirds of LDS respondents affirmed an orthodox view of the Book of Mormon as ancient scripture. The youngest respondents, less than 30 years old, reported the highest rate of orthodoxy (Mauss, Tarjan, and Esplin 1987). Nonetheless, apologists and revisionists alike writing in the late 1980s perceived that LDS orthodoxy faced mounting challenges from within.

During the early 1990s, Church leaders reacted assertively to various developments they judged to be apostasy through official actions such as monitoring the publications of suspect scholars, applying church discipline (including the famous "September Six"), and dismissing BYU faculty. Focusing more specifically on questions of historicity, apologists launched an unofficial orthodox counteroffensive by publishing often trenchant reviews of revisionists' work in the *FARMS Review*; at the same time, FARMS collaborated with the *Ensign* and Deseret Book to publish works of orthodox scholarship. Clashes between personnel at Signature Books and FARMS became so acrimonious that at one point, Signature Books threatened to sue. In another case, BYU historian William Hamblin was alleged to have embedded an insulting message about revisionist Brent Metcalfe (an acrostic spelling "Metcalfe is Butthead") in an article for the *FARMS Review*. The largest single skirmish waged in the Book of Mormon wars was Signature Books' publication of *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* in 1993 and the dedication of an entire issue of the *FARMS Review* to critiquing it. The most serious official sanctions against skeptics were the firing of BYU biblical scholar David Wright for his private disbelief in historicity and the subsequent excommunications of Wright and Brent Metcalfe, editor of *New Approaches*.

A separate front in the Book of Mormon wars was FARMS scholars' responses to criticisms leveled by fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants (some of whom drew on the work of Mormon revisionists). BYU faculty members Daniel Peterson, William Hamblin, and Louis Midgley conducted email debates with Christian countercultists that were posted to the web for wider viewing. The late 1990s saw the Internet become an increasingly important forum for Book of Mormon apologetics, including initiatives by lay intellectuals outside academia. Among these initiatives was FAIR, an online clearinghouse for LDS apologetics written at a less scholarly, and therefore more accessible, level than was much of FARMS' publishing.

*The DNA controversy*

THE BOOK OF Mormon wars and other campaigns defending orthodoxy, such as the academic freedom controversies at BYU, cooled down somewhat after the mid-1990s. Clearly orthodoxy had won, narrowing the limits of what the Church would tolerate; consequently, many dissenters or less orthodox members either withdrew or fell silent.

Controversy flared up again, however, at the beginning of the twenty-first century when anthropologist Thomas Murphy (2002, 2003), joined by molecular biologist Simon Southerton (2004), cited recent studies of Native American DNA as evidence against Book of Mormon historicity. FARMS, now an official entity at BYU, was well positioned to organize a public response, the central message of which was that a limited geography rendered the DNA challenge moot. That message enjoyed an unprecedented degree of publicity for two reasons. First, the Church publicized orthodox scholars' writing on the DNA controversy through the media and public relations infrastructure it had established for the 2002 Olympics. Second, online forums such as FAIR and the FARMS website provided additional platforms from which to respond to this and older challenges by evangelical countercultists and Mormon revisionists. Thanks to the Internet, the number of Saints engaged in written apologetics, and the size of their audience, has grown. Thus the DNA controversy has done much to privilege a limited Book of Mormon geography within the Church, over the more fundamentalistic understandings of earlier authorities such as Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie.

The Church's current official reaction to the DNA controversy has been calmer than that in the 1990s (although in a sense also more assertive, since LDS Public Affairs now monitors and responds to news stories worldwide about this and other controversies). Church leaders evidently wish to avoid making more intellectual martyrs. Disciplinary proceedings against Murphy were cancelled after they received nationwide media attention; Southerton was excommunicated, but for sexual transgression, not for his writing on DNA and the Book of Mormon. Another high-profile revisionist of the early 2000s, former institute director Grant Palmer, was merely disfellowshipped. Meanwhile, Church leaders have solidified their commitment to Book of Mormon historicity by reviving official discourse about the Book of Mormon as evidence of the Restoration, which had declined during the 1980s and 1990s (Duffy 2005).

## II. MAPPING THE ARGUMENTS

THE LITERATURE ADVOCATING or challenging Book of Mormon historicity is voluminous. What follows is a broad-ranging survey of the major arguments, but it is certainly not comprehensive. In deciding what the major arguments are, I have been guided partly by other authors' attempts to survey the state of the debate or the apologetic scholarship (Peterson 1997a, 2000; Givens 2002).

*Arguments against historicity*

THE MOST BASIC objection to Book of Mormon historicity is the book's claim to a supernatural origin. Mormon-bred philosopher and friendly skeptic Sterling McMurrin famously expressed this view as, "You don't get books from angels and

translate them by miracles; it is just that simple" (in Ostler 1984, p. 25). Apologists might protest that this kind of *a priori* skepticism denies the Book of Mormon a fair, open-minded hearing. But Latter-day Saints, like most people, make similar a priori judgments when they react with instinctive skepticism to extraordinary religious claims from other sources: a crucifix that miraculously weeps blood; Raëlian founder Claude Vorilhon's claim to have been visited by extraterrestrials called the Elohim; or, closer to home, the 2001 publication of a purported translation of the sealed record of the brother of Jared made by a former RLDS member.

Immediate dismissals aside, evidence cited against Book of Mormon historicity can be organized under four main headings: (1) parallels to ideas and events in Joseph Smith's early nineteenth-century environment; (2) parallels to texts that Smith is alleged to have used as sources; (3) purported anachronisms, implausibilities, or errors in the text; (4) challenges to the accounts that Smith and other witnesses provided of the book's miraculous production.

### Nineteenth-century environment

TO SUPPORT THE contention that the Book of Mormon is a product of the nineteenth century, not antiquity, skeptics cite the existence of parallels between ideas in the Book of Mormon and ideas of Joseph Smith's day. These include early theories of Native American origins, contemporary religious controversies, and political attitudes such as anti-Masonry. In addition, some interpreters trace events in the Book of Mormon narrative to Smith's own life or psychology. For a general response to assertions of nineteenth-century environmental influences, published in the *Ensign*, see Porter (1992).

*Theories of Native American origins.* From the time of its publication, the Book of Mormon was promoted as an explanation of Native American origins. Revisionist Dan Vogel (1986) has argued that the Book of Mormon reflects widely current ideas about the Israelite origins of Native Americans and the existence of a white Christian race, now extinct, who left behind the great mounds found in the eastern United States. Vogel also reports that stone boxes and metal plates had been unearthed from Native American mounds prior to publication of the Book of Mormon. Vogel regards these as "clear indications" against Book of Mormon historicity (1986, p. 72). Orthodox responses to this line of argument (Bushman 1984; Christensen 1990) emphasize differences between nineteenth-century theories of Native American origins and the Book of Mormon narrative, and they counter Vogel's parallels with parallels that support historicity. See also the discussion of Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*, farther down (under "Source texts").

*Contemporary religious controversies.* One of the Book of Mormon's first public critics, Alexander Campbell, charged that the book repeats "every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years" (1831, p. 93). In a similar vein, revisionists have more recently argued for parallels between Book of Mormon teachings and nineteenth-century anti-Universalism (Vogel 1993), debates around the sacrament of the Lord's supper (Thomas 1993), and rhetoric characteristic of Protestant revivalists (Thomas 1983; Palmer 2002). Apologists respond that there is no reason Christians anciently could not have confronted theological controversies similar to those of the nineteenth century; at the same time, apologists underscore differences between the Book of Mormon's religious teachings and similar nineteenth-century teachings (R. L. Anderson 1994; Tanner 1994; Tvedtnes 1994).

*Political attitudes.* Further, revisionists see parallels to political attitudes of Smith's day. Perhaps the most prominent argument of this type is that denunciations of secret combinations, such as the Gadianton robbers, reflect 1820s-era anti-Masonry (Vogel 1989, 2002a). Other skeptics have argued that the Book of Mormon reflects early republicanism, anti-Catholicism, and anxieties about market capitalism (Brodie 1971; Curtis 1990). In response, apologists underscore divergences from the nineteenth-century environment and argue for stronger parallels to antiquity. Richard Bushman (1996, 2005) maintains that the Book of Mormon has little in common with American revolutionary nationalism, while Daniel Peterson (1990a, 1990b) argues that the Gadianton robbers more strongly resemble ancient guerillas than Masons.

*Joseph Smith's life and psychology.* Two psychobiographies of Smith (Morain 1998; R. D. Anderson 1999) read episodes in the Book of Mormon, such as the slaying of Laban, as arising from psychological traumas in Joseph Smith's life, chiefly the childhood surgery on his leg. Dan Vogel (2004) draws extensive parallels—ranging from striking to tenuous—between episodes in the Book of Mormon and events or situations from Smith's life, which Vogel theorizes came to be woven into the text as Smith dictated the book in stream-of-consciousness fashion. Orthodox reviewers have severely criticized these interpretations on methodological grounds (R. N. Williams 2000; Jibson 2002; Hedges and Hedges 2005; Morris 2006).

### Source texts

SOME SKEPTICS CLAIM to have identified source texts from which Smith drew the Book of Mormon's contents. The texts around which most such arguments have revolved are the Bible, the Solomon Spaulding manuscript, and Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*.

*The Bible.* Similarities between the language of the Book of Mormon and the King James translation are obvious, and some apologists have been willing to concede that Smith actually copied at points from the Bible (e.g., Roberts 1909; but contrast Welch 1990, who prefers a theory that God independently revealed to Smith a translation that resembles the King James Version). Similarities between entire episodes from the
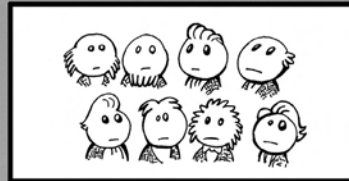
Bible and the Book of Mormon have been offered as evidence that Smith drew from the Bible, including the Apocrypha, while inventing the Book of Mormon (Roberts 1985; Palmer 2002; Vogel 2004).

A related argument against historicity is that the Book of Mormon quotes from chapters of Isaiah which biblical scholars now maintain were composed at a date too late for them to have appeared on the brass plates (Russell 1982; G. Smith 1990). For similar assertions of anachronism, see Stan Larson's argument (1986, 1993) that 3 Nephi 12–15 replicates errors from the King James Version, as compared to the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament, and David Wright's argument (1993) that Alma 13 is a reworking of a passage from Hebrews. For orthodox counterarguments to Larson and Wright, respectively, see Welch (1990) and Tvedtnes (1994).

Apologists account for similarities to biblical stories by observing that we would expect ancient writers familiar with those stories to cast their own sacred history in similar terms (Goff 1991; Szink 1991). Many orthodox interpreters (e.g., Roberts 1909; Nibley 1967; Sperry 1967) have maintained that the presence of the ostensibly anachronistic Isaiah chapters ought to be taken as evidence against the widely accepted theory dating those chapters to a later era—a theory, apologists point out, which is predicated on disbelief in prophets' ability to foretell the future.

*The Spaulding manuscript.* Through the nineteenth century, the explanation for the Book of Mormon most commonly repeated by detractors was that Smith plagiarized an unpublished romance by Solomon Spaulding, a Congregationalist preacher. In 1884, a manuscript by Spaulding was discovered that bore no resemblance to the Book of Mormon. However, on the basis of eyewitness affidavits alleging close parallels between the Book of Mormon and Spaulding's work, advocates of the Spaulding theory maintained that the Book of Mormon was taken from a second Spaulding manuscript, which remains lost (Kirkham 1959). The Spaulding theory has been generally abandoned since Fawn Brodie (1971) showed that there is no evidence connecting Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, from whom Smith is supposed to have obtained Spaulding's manuscript, as early as the theory requires. Nevertheless, the Spaulding theory still has defenders (Cowdery, Davis, and Vanick 2005).

*View of the Hebrews.* In the early twentieth century, B. H. Roberts (1985) became convinced that parallels between the Book of Mormon and an 1825 publication, Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*, posed a formidable challenge to which the Church needed to respond. (Whether this challenge caused Roberts to lose his faith in Book of Mormon historicity has been a subject of debate: see sidebar, page 40.) Fawn Brodie (1971) and David Persuitte (2000) regard *View of the Hebrews* as a principal source for the ideas behind the Book of Mormon. Ethan Smith's book advocated an Israelite origin for Native Americans and postulated that a more civilized branch had eventually been annihilated by tribes who lapsed into bar-

barism. As a counterweight to B. H. Roberts's catalogue of parallels between *View of the Hebrews* and the Book of Mormon, John Welch (1992a) has catalogued their "unparallels" to underscore the two works' numerous dissimilarities.

*Anachronisms, implausibilities, and errors*

SKEPTICS POINT TO elements of the Book of Mormon narrative that they maintain are anachronistic, given what is known about ancient American cultures, or simply implausible or erroneous. The arguments to which recent skeptics have tended to assign the most significance are based on linguistics, demographics, and genetics. These arguments hinge on the assumption that the Book of Mormon purports to be a history of hemispheric scope, an assumption that apologists have increasingly repudiated since the 1980s.
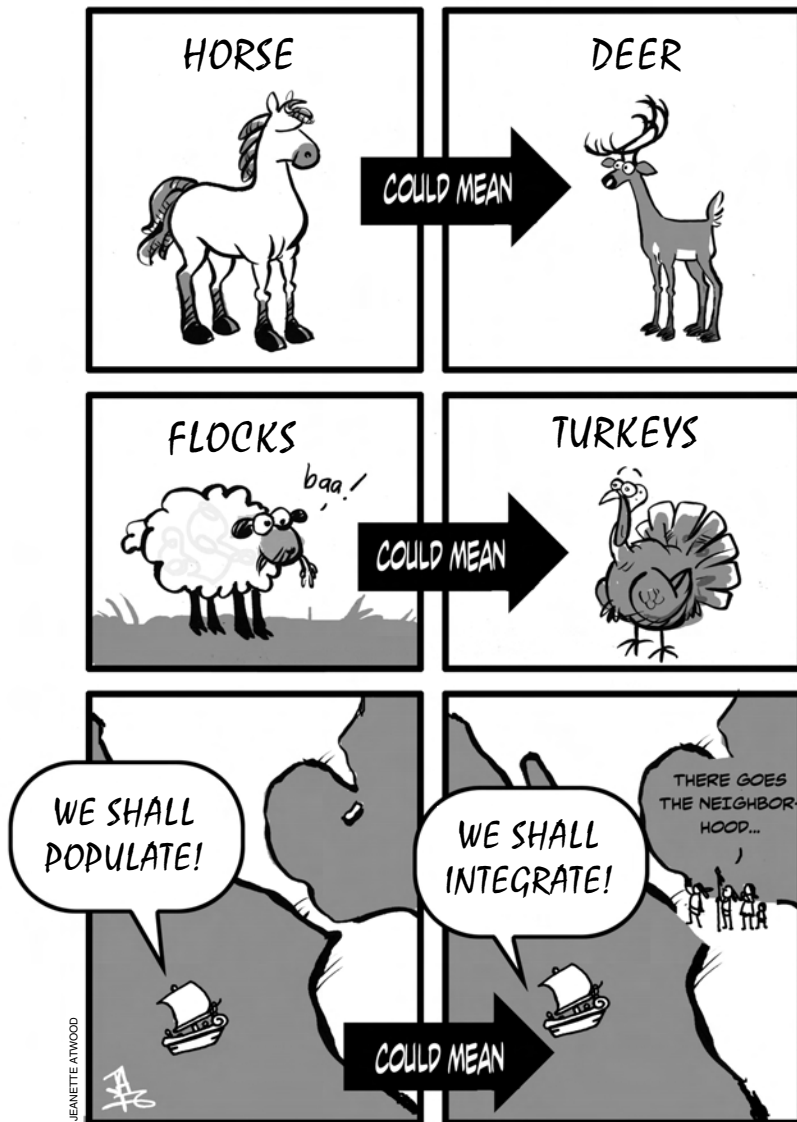
*Anachronisms.* By the turn of the twentieth century, with anthropology and archaeology more firmly established as disciplines, it became apparent that evidence was lacking for the presence in ancient America of some technologies, crops, and animals named in the Book of Mormon. These included steel, cimeters, cement, the wheel (implied by reference to chariots), silk, wheat, barley, and horses. Such anachronisms were cited in a form letter that the Smithsonian Institution used until 1998 to respond to inquiries about the institution's view of the Book of Mormon. (On LDS apologists' criticisms of the Smithsonian statement and their successful effort to have it replaced, see Ostling and Ostling 1999; Givens 2002).

Apologists have responded to purported anachronisms in essentially two ways. First, they underscore the instability of an argument from a negative; that is, the absence of archaeological evidence does not preclude the possibility of future discoveries which might corroborate Book of Mormon claims. In fact, apologists can now point to discoveries of metal, barley, and horse remains that suggest these questions are, at least, not as settled as skeptics insinuate (Sorenson 1985; Peterson 1997a; J. E. Clark 2006). Also, items brought from the Old World, like wheat and barley, may have been used on a limited scale and therefore might not have survived the Nephites' extinction (Ball and Hess 2004).

Apologists' second response to anachronisms is to argue that Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon may apply familiar words to unfamiliar but comparable items. "Cimeter" may refer to some other, loosely similar weapon; "flocks" may refer to turkeys or dogs; "horses" may refer to deer (Sorenson 1985; Hamblin & Merrill 1990). Apologists note that reapplying familiar names has historical precedent: it was done by the Spanish conquistadors (Sorenson 1985, 1999b; Roper 1999) as well as by the King James translators, who anachronistically used the word "steel" to refer to other kinds of metal (Roberts 1909).

*Implausibilities of a hemispheric geography.* Until the end of the twentieth century, the prevailing view among Latter-day Saints was that the Book of Mormon takes place in North and

# A BOOK OF MORMON THESAURUS



Book of Mormon history. BYU geneticist Michael Whiting (2003) concedes that the DNA evidence disproves the traditional hemispheric model for the Book of Mormon. But Mormon intellectuals have been retreating from a hemispheric geography since the early twentieth century (Roper 2003). A limited Book of Mormon geography, which sees the book as being set in a smaller region, neutralizes linguistic, demographic, and genetic implausibilities because the Book of Mormon is no longer understood as the history of the peopling of the entire hemisphere. The population figures Kunich critiqued become more plausible, apologists maintain, if Book of Mormon peoples are understood as small colonies surrounded by and merging into already present indigenous groups (Sorenson 1992a; J. Smith 1997). Likewise, a limited model would not lead scholars to expect to find genetic traces of Israelite colonists (Meldrum and Stephens 2003; Whiting 2003).

Revisionists have protested that a limited geography contradicts a plain reading of the Book of Mormon, as well as the teachings of past Church leaders, and is an "ad hoc hypothesis" serving only to shield the Book of Mormon from disconfirmation (Vogel and Metcalfe 2002; Wunderli 2002; Murphy 2003; Metcalfe 2004). Apologists respond that what the Book of Mormon says about itself must take precedence over what even Church leaders have said about it (Sorenson and Roper 2003; Roper 2006). Sorenson argues (1992) that there is internal evidence for the presence of indigenous peoples in the Book of Mormon, such as the mysterious appearance of the character Sherem in the book of Jacob.

*Other implausibilities or errors.* Further, several miscellaneous implausibilties or errors allegedly exist in the Book of Mormon. Although arguably trivial, these arguments persist in anti-Mormon polemics originating outside the LDS community, and apologists have therefore been concerned to respond to them. These include the supposed medical implausibility of the death of Shiz in Ether 15; the inability of Nephi's small group to build a temple like Solomon's (2 Nephi 5:16); Alma's prophecy naming Jerusalem rather than Bethlehem as the place of Jesus' birth (Alma 7:10); and the appearance of the French word "adieu" at the end of the book of Jacob. For replies to these objections, see Daniel Peterson (1997a).

*The Book of Mormon witnesses*

THROUGHOUT THE CHURCH'S history, Joseph Smith's own testimony and the statements of the Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses have been proffered as authentication for the Book of Mormon. Other individuals close to Smith, including

South America and that the native peoples of both continents are descended from the Lamanites. This view poses serious difficulties. As early as the 1920s, skeptics pointed out that the diversity of Native American languages could not have developed from a single origin in the time frame the Book of Mormon requires (Roberts 1985). Analogously, John Kunich (1993) has argued that the population figures given in the text represent unlikely growth rates for a small colony. Thomas Murphy (2002) and Simon Southerton (2004) have cited DNA studies tracing Native Americans to Asia as evidence against Book of Mormon historicity. Enthusiastic revisionists have hailed the DNA controversy as a decisive "Galileo event" pressuring Latter-day Saints to "acquiesc[e] to the empirical data" (Metcalfe et al. 2001; Peterson 2003).

Apologists reply that these arguments do not invalidate Book of Mormon historicity, only a hemispheric scenario for

his mother Lucy and his wife Emma, also claimed to have handled the golden plates or the interpreters through a cloth covering (Bushman 2005). Skeptics contend that Smith's and the witnesses' claims cannot be taken at face value. Drawing on recent scholarship documenting Smith's involvement with folk magic, revisionists have constructed alternative accounts of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Smith was a pious fraud who used deception to promote faith. Vogel elaborates a scenario in which Smith constructed objects out of easily obtained materials, such as tin, that he could pass off as golden plates or interpreters when concealed under cloth. Although no other scholar has fleshed out as fully as Vogel an alternative explanation for the tangible artifacts, many non-orthodox scholars who write about the production of the

AMMON
PROTECTING
HIS "FLOCKS"
(revised version)

JEANETTE ATWOOD

*Subjectivity of the witnesses' experience.* Based on nineteenth-century documents, Dan Vogel (2002b) and Grant Palmer (2002) argue that the Three and Eight Witnesses did not straightforwardly see and handle the golden plates but rather had visions of them. If true, this would undermine orthodox claims to the effect that the witnesses' testimony is "perhaps the most extensive . . . body of evidence in support of the tactile reality of supernaturally conveyed artifacts that we have in the modern age" (Givens 2002, p. 22). Apologist Richard Anderson (1981, 2005) has defended both the personal integrity of the Book of Mormon witnesses and the objective, material reality of their encounter with the plates.

*Alternative explanations for tangible artifacts.* To account for individuals, such as Lucy Mack Smith and Emma Smith, who claimed to have handled the golden plates or the interpreters in everyday settings, Dan Vogel (1999, 2004) theorizes that

Book of Mormon subtly signal their conviction that some kind of deception was in play (Duffy 2006). For criticisms of Vogel's historical reconstruction, see Hedges and Hedges (2005) and Morris (2006).

*Folk magic.* The Book of Mormon's earliest detractors cited Smith's involvement in magical treasure hunting as evidence that he was an imposter or deluded (Kirkham 1959). If Smith falsely claimed—whether sincerely or fraudulently—that he could locate hidden treasures with a seerstone, then that falsehood provides a precedent for doubting his claims about the discovery of the golden plates. Dan Vogel (2004) offers one version of this argument. Furthermore, if the story of the angel Moroni and the golden plates evolved from earlier accounts about a shape-shifting spirit guarding a hidden treasure (Huggins 2003a), this, too, would tend to cast doubt on the historicity of the canonical account of the Book of Mormon's

origins. (For a response to Huggins, see Morris 2005).

In a move that is somewhat surprising given how problematic Smith's folk magic connection has been for many Latter-day Saints, Richard Bushman (1999) neutralizes the threat to historicity by embracing Smith's magical activities as historical. That is, Bushman proposes that Smith actually possessed the power to locate objects with a seerstone as part of his training for prophethood.

## Arguments for historicity

ORTHODOX SCHOLARS ROUTINELY acknowledge that faith in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon must ultimately rest on personal testimony. But apologists also insist on the value of marshalling evidence to demonstrate the rationality of belief in historicity. The literature advocating historicity, much of it produced by FARMS, is voluminous, and little of this work has been specifically critiqued by skeptics. Overall, apologists have invested considerably more energy in responding to skeptics than skeptics have in responding to apologists. This disparity has allowed apologists to insinuate that their position has been unjustly dismissed or that the evidence for historicity is too strong for skeptics to rebut. As one orthodox scholar declares, "The failure of those who reject the historicity of the Book of Mormon to respond cogently to the increasing body of evidence and argument supporting historicity is becoming painfully apparent" (Hamblin 1995, p. 82).

Evidence offered for historicity can be organized under four headings: (1) correspondence between the Book of Mormon's internal geography and actual locations in both the Old and New Worlds; (2) parallels to cultures of the New World, especially ancient Mesoamerica; (3) parallels to languages, texts, and customs of the Old World, especially the ancient Near East; (4) textual analyses, such as wordprint studies, that argue for the implausibility of Joseph Smith's having authored the book.

## Book of Mormon geography

THE ABILITY TO map the geographical descriptions in the Book of Mormon onto real world locations lends the book plausibility. Apologists have proposed real world correspondences for Book of Mormon locations in both the Old and New Worlds.

*Old World.* Apologists have argued that Arabian geography corresponds to the account in 1 Nephi more closely than Joseph Smith could have known (Nibley 1988b; England 1996; for an evangelical response, see Finley 2002). Based on the description given in the Book of Mormon, Warren and Michaela Aston (1994) identify Khor Kharfot, in present-day Yemen, as the land of Bountiful, where Lehi's party constructed their ship. Multiple candidates have been proposed as well for the valley of Lemuel (Brown 2007). Aston et al. (1992) link Nahom, where Ishmael was buried, to an ancient burial ground in a Yemeni region called Nehem. A tribal name derived from the same Semitic root, Nihm, appears on a recently excavated altar that non-Mormon archaeologists date to between 700 and 500 BCE, indicating that the name was in use in the region around Lehi's time (Brown 1999). Terryl Givens calls this altar, and another like it, "the most impressive find to date corroborating Book of Mormon historicity" (2002, p. 121).

*New World.* The first comprehensive attempt at a New World geography for the Book of Mormon was the set of footnotes Orson Pratt created for the 1879 edition, identifying locations named in the book with sites in North and South America. However, Pratt's geography was not the result of rigorous investigation and was dropped after 1920 (Givens 2002). The most careful, extensively documented, and widely accepted geography to date is BYU anthropologist John Sorenson's (1985) limited Tehuantepec geography, which identifies Book of Mormon locations with sites in southern Mexico and Guatemala. Sorenson maps Book of Mormon narratives in detail on the real-world landscape, and he asserts close chronological parallels between the Book of Mormon and developments in Mesoamerican cultures. Sorenson's geography has been featured in the *Ensign* (Sorenson 1984) and has become the favored model among apologists.

In addition to arguments against limited Book of Mormon geographies in general, discussed earlier, Sorenson's geography has been criticized on archaeological grounds; critics also fault his model for rotating the compass 45–60 degrees and for identifying a too-wide isthmus as the "narrow neck of land" (Matheny 1993; Wunderli 2002; for a response to criticism, see Sorenson 1994). Believers in historicity have proposed a number of alternative geographies, but none of these has been as influential as the Tehuantepec model. The alternatives include limited Great Lakes geographies, which set the Book of Mormon around Joseph Smith's home in New York (J. E. Clark 2002), plus surprising Old World candidates such as the Malay Peninsula (Olsen 2004) or Eritrea (Melekin 2000).

## New World parallels

LATTER-DAY SAINTS have been connecting the Book of Mormon to ancient New World cultures since within Joseph Smith's lifetime (Givens 2002). Over the years, apologists have looked to ancient American archaeology, indigenous myths and lore, and native languages for evidence supporting Book of Mormon historicity. Such arguments have become more sophisticated since the mid-twentieth century, as more Latter-day Saints have gained training in relevant academic disciplines.

*Archaeology.* Apologists have long pointed to ruins in Central and South America as evidence that there were high civilizations in the New World, with temples, highways, and buried cities, as reported by the Book of Mormon (Roberts 1909; Hunter 1956; Richards 1971; Cheesman 1974). Archaeological parallels played a conspicuous role in mis-

sionary presentations of the 1970s, such as the Church film *Ancient America Speaks* (1974) or the photos of golden plates, temples, and murals that used to be published as prefatory matter in the Book of Mormon. Interest in corroborating the Book of Mormon led to the formation of BYU's New World Archaeological Foundation in the 1950s, although the center never directly engaged in apologetics (Larson 1996; Givens 2002).

Some Book of Mormon apologists have been drawn to diffusionism, a minority view within anthropology which argues that long-range migration, including transoceanic contact with ancient America, has been more frequent and influential than the majority view admits. Leading LDS diffusionists include Hugh Nibley (1988b) and John Sorenson (Sorenson and Raish 1990; Sorenson 2005). Among the evidences for diffusion that have attracted Latter-day Saints' attention are the Bat Creek stone, a purported Hebrew inscription unearthed in Tennessee by the Smithsonian Institution (Cheesman 1975; Roper 1997), and the twentieth-century transoceanic raft voyages of Thor Heyerdahl, who wanted to demonstrate the plausibility of such voyages having been made anciently between the Old and New Worlds ("Interview" 1972; "Thor Heyerdahl's Voyages" 1989).

Even some orthodox Latter-day Saints have regarded the search for New World archeological support dubiously. Writing for the *Ensign*, BYU religion professor Ellis T. Rasmussen dismissed the effort as "interesting" but "marginally successful" (1987, p. 53). Sorenson (1976) has complained that amateur ventures undermine serious work in this area. On a much more skeptical note, non-Mormon archaeologist Michael Coe has urged Latter-day Saints to abandon the "fruitless quest" for Book of Mormon evidence (1973, p. 48).

*Myths and lore.* Accounts of America's indigenous peoples written during the era of European colonization describe native religions as paralleling biblical stories and Christian practices. LDS apologists during the early to mid-twentieth century used such accounts as support for the Book of Mormon (Roberts 1909; Talmage 1924; Hunter and Ferguson 1950). In his widely read *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, LeGrand Richards (1958) cited an oral history of the Washoe, in North America, as corroboration for the cataclysm described in 3 Nephi 8. Another popular apologist, Milton R. Hunter (1956), drew heavily on lore about white Indians. Parallels to the Mayan sacred text, the Popol Vuh, have also attracted LDS interest from the nineteenth century (Thatcher 1881) to the present (Christenson 2000).

The most persistent use of indigenous mythology in popular Book of Mormon apologetics, including works by General Authorities, is the white god Quetzalcoatl (Taylor 1882; Roberts 1909; Talmage 1924; Hunter 1959; Petersen 1972). Although he cautions against connecting all Quetzalcoatl lore to Christ, John Sorenson (1985, 1999a) proposes that a decline in Quetzalcoatl worship around 200 CE corresponds to the apostasy from Christ's church recorded in 4 Nephi. Another high-profile parallel drawn between the Book of

Mormon and Mesoamerican mythology is the interpretation of Stela 5, a stone engraving from Chiapas, as a depiction of Lehi's dream, an interpretation put forward by BYU archaeology professor M. Wells Jakeman in 1953 (Brewer 1999).

Orthodox academics since mid-twentieth century have avoided lore about white Indians or purported biblical parallels in indigenous religion. The sources are unreliable: Christian parallels may reflect simply the perceptions of European observers or may have been absorbed by natives as a result of European contact. Brant Gardner (1986) extends this caution to mythology about Quetzalcoatl, as does Diane Wirth (2002), though, unlike Gardner, Wirth does not entirely reject Quetzalcoatl myths as offering plausible parallels to Christ. Jakeman's interpretation of Stela 5 has been criticized by a number of orthodox scholars (Norman 1985; Brewer 1999; but see also J. E. Clark 1999, who proposes that the stela's imagery might be connected to the Jaredites).

*Languages.* If ancient Mesoamerica was colonized by people who spoke Hebrew and wrote with Egyptian characters, and who interacted with indigenous peoples, then one might expect to find signs of Hebrew and Egyptian influence on Native American languages. John Sorenson (1997) points to possible connections between the Mayan language and Hebrew; furthermore, he cites a noted non-Mormon archaeologist who asserted that a cylinder seal unearthed in Mexico bears Egyptian hieroglyphs. Brian Stubbs (1996) argues for "substantial similarities" between Hebrew and the Uto-Aztecan language family.

### Old World parallels

BEGINNING AT MID-TWENTIETH century, as Milton R. Hunter and other popular apologists were promoting New World archaeology as evidence for Book of Mormon historicity, Berkeley-trained classicist Hugh Nibley pursued a different approach: locating parallels to ancient cultures in the Old World. Because of his diffusionist views, Nibley ranged quite freely over the Mediterranean world and Asia in his search for parallels. Subsequent research of this kind has focused more narrowly on the Near East; such work has been a principal focus of FARMS. Orthodox scholars maintain that the numerous, complex parallels they have drawn to Old World languages, biblical and extrabiblical texts, and ancient customs far surpass what Joseph Smith could have known or what could be attributed to coincidence.

*Languages.* Early twentieth-century apologists argued for similarities between the Anthon transcript and hieratic or demotic Egyptian characters (Roberts 1909; Crowley 1942–1944). A more modest argument cites hieratic and demotic script merely as precedents showing the plausibility that something like the Book of Mormon's reformed Egyptian script existed; to that same end, apologists cite the discovery of documents that use Egyptian characters to represent Semitic languages (Tvedtnes and Ricks 1996; Hamblin 2007).

Hugh Nibley (1967, 1988b) traced a number of Book of

# Three Things
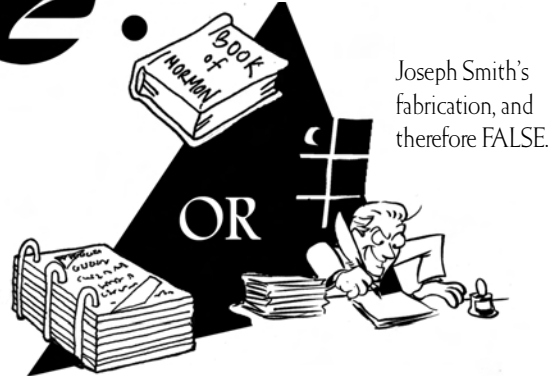# Critics and Apologists
# Seem to Agree On:

**1.** Joseph Smith was:

A Prophet

OR

A Fraud!

**2.** The Book of Mormon is:

Joseph Smith's fabrication, and therefore FALSE.

OR

A translation of a historical record, and therefore TRUE.

**3.**

If the Book of Mormon is true/false, then …

Joseph Smith was/was not a prophet …

Therefore, the church he established is/is not God's restored church.

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Mormon names to names or words in Hebrew or Egyptian. Perhaps Nibley's most provocative identification is linking the Jaredites' word for honeybee, "deseret," to Egyptian *dsrt*, the Red Crown of Lower Egypt (1988b, 2000). Tracing Book of Mormon names to Old World languages has continued in recent years as part of FARMS' Onomasticon Project ("Seeking Agreement" 2000; for examples of such research, see H. C. Wright 1992; Welch 1992b; Ricks and Tvedtnes 1997). In addition, orthodox scholars have identified ancient Near Eastern documents in which they claim that Book of Mormon names appear, thus indicating that the names are not simply Smith's inventions (Tvedtnes, Gee, and Roper 2000). One such attestation is the appearance of the name Alma, which skeptics had pegged as a Latin-derived anachronism, in a Hebrew document from the second century CE (Hoskisson 1998).

John Tvedtnes (1970, 1991) has identified Hebrew syntax structures in the English text of the Book of Mormon, such as the if-and conditional used in place of English if-then. From these Hebraisms, Tvedtnes argues that Smith's text is a close translation of a Hebrew original. Royal Skousen (1997) reports that the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon contained even more Hebraisms, which were edited out to make the text conform to English grammar.

Skeptic Edward Ashment (1993) disputes a number of Nibley's purported parallels to Egyptian, including "deseret." Ashment proposes instead that Smith constructed Book of Mormon names from a list of recurring stems, prefixes, and suffixes. Also, Ashment faults the argument from Hebraisms on several grounds: that Hebraisms appear also in Smith's revelations in the D&C, which have no purported Hebrew origin; that Book of Mormon syntax dramatically deviates from Hebrew; and that Hebraisms which are present can be explained as an imitation of the King James Bible. For a response to Ashment, see Gee (1994). For an evangelical scholar's criticism of apologists' claims about Hebraisms and Book of Mormon names, see Finley (2002).

*Biblical and extrabiblical texts.* Apologists cite parallels to apocryphal texts, or to features of the biblical text that Smith arguably would not have known about, as evidence for the Book of Mormon's ancient origins. One of the most popular has been chiasmus, a stylistic feature of the Hebrew Bible which John Welch (1969, 2007) first identified in the Book of Mormon while a missionary in the 1960s. Welch was particularly impressed to find (1991) that the entire chapter of Alma 36 is a complex, extended chiasm. As further evidence for Book of Mormon historicity, Allen Christenson (1988a, 1988b) has identified chiasmus in Mesoamerican texts. Skeptics have minimized, even satirized, the evidentiary force of chiasmus by locating it in texts with non-Hebraic origins, from the Doctrine and Covenants (Metcalfe 1993) to Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* (Patterson 2000). Earl Wunderli specifically targets Welch's claims about Alma 36 as an instance of having "imposed chiasmus on the Book of Mormon where none was intended" (2005, p. 99). In response, Welch (1995, 1997b, 2003) has specified guidelines for identifying chiasmus

and deciding what its presence proves about historicity.

Another parallel to a feature of the biblical text that apologists argue Smith could not have known about is the appearance of the phrase "upon all the ships of the sea" in 2 Nephi 12:16, ostensibly a translation of Isaiah 2:16 taken from the brass plates. This phrase does not appear in the King James Bible, but it does appear in the Greek Septuagint. Many apologists, beginning with Sidney Sperry in the 1930s, have cited this peculiarity as evidence that Smith was actually working from an ancient text, not simply revising the King James translation (Pike and Seeley 2005). Skeptics counter that Smith could have learned about the Septuagint phrasing from nineteenth-century sources (D. Wright 1998; Huggins 2003b). Orthodox scholars Dana Pike and David Seeley (2005) caution that Sperry's argument about this passage is weakened by complexities in the relationship between the Hebrew and Septuagint readings, including the possibility of a Greek translator's error.

Turning from biblical to extrabiblical texts, Hugh Nibley (1982, 1988a, 1988b) looks to the Dead Sea Scrolls, Old and New Testament pseudepigrapha, and the Lachish letters (Israelite military documents from the time of Lehi) to corroborate Book of Mormon accounts of antiquity. John Welch (1997a) draws parallels between Lehi's dream and an apocryphal text called the Narrative of Zosimus. John Tvetdnes (2000) compares the Book of Mormon to hidden record motifs in ancient Jewish and Christian literatures and even farther afield to the Babylonians and Chinese Buddhists. LDS apologists have also become interested in the biblical scholarship of non-Mormon Margaret Barker, who draws on apocryphal literature to argue that motifs associated with Christianity date back to preexilic Israelite temple religion. After Kevin Christensen, a writer connected to FARMS, introduced Barker to the Book of Mormon, Barker concluded that its use of Christian motifs in a setting prior to the Christian era is consistent with her own reconstruction of ancient Israelite religion (Christensen 2004, 2005; Barker 2004, 2006).

*Ancient customs.* As a diffusionist, Hugh Nibley (1988b) postulated the existence of a common cultural heritage—what he called the "epic milieu"—that was reflected in the epic literatures of widely scattered European and Asian peoples. Subsequent generations of apologists have been more restrained geographically, focusing on the Near East as they identify parallels to ancient customs that they believe corroborate and elucidate the Book of Mormon's ancient historical setting. Despite the new apologists' more restricted focus, the results of their research fill several anthologies and more.

A FARMS anthology, *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Ricks and Hamblin 1990), argues that the Book of Mormon accurately depicts pre-modern war practices in the ancient Near East, as well as in Mesoamerica. Contributors to an anthology on King Benjamin's sermon (Welch and Ricks 1998) draw parallels to festivals, ceremonies, and orations of the ancient Israelites and other Near Eastern peoples. Another essay collection, *The Allegory of the Olive Tree* (Ricks and Welch 1994),

maintains that the Book of Mormon reflects a familiarity with olive cultivation that Joseph Smith could not have possessed. Nibley (1988a, 1988b) made a similar argument about the travels of Lehi's party through the Arabian Desert compared to the actual survival tactics of Bedouins.

Douglas Salmon (2000) has charged Nibley with "parallelo-mania": selecting parallels that serve his argument and ignoring those that don't, overlooking alternative explanations for parallels, even misrepresenting sources. Less sweeping in their criticism than Salmon, orthodox scholars Kent Jackson (1988) and William Hamblin (1990) nevertheless voice similar reservations about Nibley's work. (However, see Hamblin 2001 for a defense of Nibley against Salmon.)

Although Salmon (2000, p. 129) implies that his criticism of Nibley is applicable to the many others who draw "endless parallels" between the ancient Near East and the Book of Mormon, skeptics have responded to little of the extensive literature linking the Book of Mormon to Old World antiquity. One exception is Mark Thomas's review (1991) of *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, in which he faults the anthology's creators for claiming to have corroborated the Book of Mormon before examining parallels to Joseph Smith's nineteenth-century environment. (For an answer to this criticism, see Hamblin 1991.) Skeptics such as Edward Ashment (1990) and Brent Metcalfe (1993) accuse apologists of hunting up evidence to support predetermined conclusions. That allegation may help explain the lack of specific response to orthodox scholars' work: if one believes the work is fatally flawed methodologically, no further rebuttal seems to be needed.

### Implausibility of Smith's authorship

ORTHODOX SCHOLARS MAINTAIN that the multitude of Old World and New World parallels they have identified militate against the plausibility of Smith's having authored the book. In addition, apologists point to wordprint studies, evidence from the original Book of Mormon manuscript, and the book's literary complexity in general to argue for the implausibility of Smith's authorship.

*Wordprint studies.* Technically known as stylometry, wordprint studies statistically analyze word use in texts to identify stylistic patterns distinctive to an author. LDS researchers who have conducted wordprint studies of the Book of Mormon (Larsen and Rencher 1982; Hilton 1997) report that their results indicate the book has multiple authors but does not resemble the writing of Joseph Smith or other proposed nineteenth-century authors. By contrast, a stylometric study of the book by non-Mormon researcher David Holmes (1992) does argue for Smith's authorship. See Schaalje, Hilton, and Archer (1997) for a critique of Holmes's study; see Croft (1981) and Ashment (1993) for critiques of LDS researchers' wordprint studies. Apologist John Tvedtnes (1994, p. 33) has voiced strong skepticism about Book of Mormon wordprint studies, noting that some of the words these studies analyze, such as "of," do not occur in Hebrew and therefore would not

have appeared in what Tvedtnes believes was the original ancient text.

*Evidence from the original manuscript.* Since 1988, BYU linguist Royal Skousen has managed the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project (Bradford and Coutts 2002). Among this project's objectives has been to reconstruct and transcribe what survives of the original Book of Mormon manuscript. From his work with the original manuscript, Skousen claims (1994, 1997) to have found evidence that the Book of Mormon is a tightly, but not perfectly, controlled translation dictated from a text that Joseph Smith saw, about 20–30 words at a time, as he looked into the interpreters.

*Literary complexity.* English professor Robert Rees (2002) compares the Book of Mormon to the work of nineteenth-century American authors such as Emerson, Melville, and Whitman to argue that not even those authors could have written the book, much less Joseph Smith. Another LDS English professor, Richard Rust (1997), performs an extended literary analysis that likewise paints the Book of Mormon as a complex and elegant text. Mark Thomas (1999) is another writer who applies techniques of literary analysis to the Book of Mormon, but Thomas attempts to separate his analysis from questions of authorship.

One response to the argument that the Book of Mormon is too complex, and was produced too quickly, to be a composition of Smith's is Scott Dunn's proposal (1985) that the book is a product of automatic writing, a paranormal phenomenon in which authors create lengthy, complicated texts, seemingly beyond their natural abilities and apparently under some other influence. Rees (2006) contests Dunn's proposal, largely on the basis of geographical, textual, and cultural parallels supporting the book's historicity, though Rees grants that there is some commonality between automatic writing and Smith's inspired translation of the Book of Mormon.

### III. MAPPING THE POSITIONS

THUS FAR THIS ARTICLE HAS SUMMARIZED THE historicity question as if it were a two-party debate: arguments for versus arguments against. But in fact, writers have adopted a wide array of positions around this issue. William Hamblin (1994) organizes views on historicity into five categories: evangelical, doctrinal traditionalist, historical traditionalist, theistic naturalist, and secular naturalist. Louis Midgley (1994) offers a different set of categories, also numbering five. While Hamblin's and Midgley's categories are helpfully discriminating, attitudes toward Book of Mormon historicity are even more diverse than these categories make evident.

Mapping different positions on historicity is complicated because at least three separate questions are involved: (1) Is the Book of Mormon ancient? (2) What does historicity imply for the book's status as scripture? (3) What do a person's beliefs about historicity imply for his or her relationship to the LDS

Church? To complicate matters further, a handful of authors have recently used postmodern theories to entirely rethink the terms of the historicity debates.

In the following discussion I do not intend to corral people into rigidly demarcated categories. Rather, when I speak of "positions," I mean simply to identify poles or signposts that can be used to locate a particular view of historicity in relation to others: closer to X than to Y, definitely not Z, certain commonalities with W, etc. The basic message is that Mormons' thinking about Book of Mormon historicity and its implications is diverse, and individuals who question historicity have pursued a variety of paths regarding their relationship to the LDS Church.

### Is the Book of Mormon ancient?

IN RESPONSE TO the question "Is the Book of Mormon ancient?" writers have offered basically four answers: "Yes," "No," "Yes and no," and "Undecided." Those who answer "yes" vary in their views on how reliable the Book of Mormon is as a record of the ancient past, while those who answer "no" vary in willingness to assert that Joseph Smith was therefore a fraud.

*Both ancient and modern.* The most discussed version of "Yes and no" is Blake Ostler's modern expansion theory (but see Rees 2002 for another version of this position). Ostler proposes (1987) that in the process of translating the plates—a process Ostler characterizes as creative, participatory revelation—Joseph Smith expanded the ancient record to include interpretations and commentary relevant to his nineteenth-century context. This approach lets Ostler account both for evidences of an ancient origin, such as Hebrew literary forms, and for anachronisms such as discussions of nineteenth-century theological questions. Ostler's theory has been criticized on multiple fronts. Stephen Robinson (1989) and Robert Millet (1993), defenders of historicity, believe that Ostler concedes too much to skeptics. Meanwhile, revisionist Anthony Hutchinson (1993) finds it absurdly complicated to theorize that God would preserve an ancient record whose message would be rendered unrecognizable by modern expansions.

*Undecided.* One author who answers "I don't know" is former SUNSTONE editor Dan Wotherspoon, who has made a deliberate choice to stay open on the question of historicity. He feels that he is "on a sacred journey" with the text and its characters—historical or not— and therefore "Nephi still lives for me" (2005, p. 9). Former Church historian Leonard Arrington stated that he was "prepared to accept [LDS claims] as historical or as metaphorical," but "that they convey religious truth I have never had any doubt" (1985, p. 37). This kind of open-ended attitude is favorably viewed by Jeff Burton, author of *For Those Who Wonder* (1994) and the SUNSTONE column "Borderlands," both guides for Mormons who experience doubt about conventional LDS teachings.

*Ancient but not historical?* Believing that the Book of Mormon has "historicity" in the sense that it is an ancient record is not necessarily the same as believing that it has "historicity" in the sense of reliably reporting the past. Leading twentieth-century Mormon scriptorians—Joseph Fielding Smith, Bruce R. McConkie, LeGrand Richards, Mark E. Petersen—tended to read the Book of Mormon and other LDS scriptures as if these texts were transparent to the facts of history and the will of God: if the text says X, then X is true. However, other believers in an ancient Book of Mormon have been open to the possibility that the book reflects the limited knowledge or cultural biases of its authors. For example, John Tvetdnes (2003) cautiously proposes that Nephite authors were racist in how they wrote about Lamanites. A vivid example of this approach is Orson Scott Card's speculation (1993) that the people of Zarahemla did not, in fact, come from Jerusalem but created that story about themselves to facilitate a peaceful coexistence with the Nephites. For Tvedtnes and Card, there is a sense in which the Book of Mormon may be ancient but not fully historical.

*Modern but not fraudulent?* Orthodox writers commonly assert that denying Book of Mormon historicity is equivalent to accusing Joseph Smith of delusion or fraud. This same dichotomous approach is typically taken by Christian counter-cultists (albeit with the conclusions reversed), as well as by some secular skeptics. However, skeptics writing in a scholarly mode are rarely so baldly reductive (Duffy 2006). It is true that Fawn Brodie (1971) and Dan Vogel (2004) are frank about their views that Smith practiced deception in connection with the creation of the Book of Mormon, while William Morain (1998) and Robert Anderson (1999) attempt to diagnose Smith's psychopathologies; but these authors still paint Smith as a figure with complex motivations who was, at some level, sincerely religious. Many writers, even when showing signs of their skepticism about historicity, nevertheless prefer to write about Smith as someone who genuinely believed himself to be a prophet. Jan Shipps (1985) exemplifies this approach with her insistence on "bracketing" the question of the Book of Mormon's authenticity while comparing Smith's revelatory experiences to those of biblical personages such as Paul. Revisionists who see the Book of Mormon as scripture, though not historical, likewise resist implying that Smith was a fraud.

### Is the Book of Mormon scripture?

WITHIN THE LDS Church, the most commonly voiced view—a view that has even been enforced by Church discipline—is that the Book of Mormon must be historical in order to be "true." By contrast, a minority of LDS or former LDS writers argue that the book can be embraced as scripture even if it is not historical. Undergirding the different views are different understandings of the concepts of scripture and revelation.

*The orthodox dilemma: Historical or false.* From the nineteenth century to the present, General Authorities and other apologists have cast the historicity question as a stark dilemma: either the Book of Mormon is, as Joseph Smith claimed, a miraculous translation of an ancient record, or it should be rejected as falsehood. General Authorities who have voiced this position include Orson Pratt (1850), B. H. Roberts (1909), J. Reuben Clark (1938), Bruce R. McConkie (1983), Ezra Taft Benson (1992), Jeffrey R. Holland (1997), and Dallin H. Oaks (2001). Among LDS intellectuals outside the hierarchy, Louis Midgley (1987, 1990, 1994, 2001) is perhaps the most prolific defender of historicity as a *sine qua non* for LDS faith. "What is at stake in the current debate," Midgley warns, "is nothing less than the content and even the possibility of faith as Latter-day Saints have known it" (1990, p. 503).

The orthodox dilemma sees the authority of scripture as dependent on historicity. If the narratives of God's interventions in history—the Atonement, the Restoration, and so on—are human invention, not historical fact, then the scriptures speak with merely human, not divine, authority; and even their human authority would be crippled by the fact that they teach falsehoods. Robert Millet (1993) maintains that if the Book of Mormon were not historical, it would not have the power to save souls. Historicity is also indispensable for those who cite the Book of Mormon as a witness to the historicity of events recorded in the Bible, such as the resurrection of Jesus (Maxwell 1988; Nyman 1991; Matthews 1992).

Some revisionists (Lindgren 1990; Thomas 1999) allege that the orthodox preoccupation with asserting the Book of Mormon's authority has led the Saints to pay inadequate attention to the book's teachings. Anthony Hutchinson (1993) believes that insisting on historicity leads to fundamentalism, authoritarianism, legalism, and false certitude, which in turn constitute a kind of idolatry. Mark Thomas argues that the Book of Mormon's authority as scripture is independent of historicity: "The book's authority cannot depend on its age. If the Book of Mormon's message is profound, that alone should be sufficient reason for serious analysis and dialogue. If the book is not worth reading, no claim to antiquity can salvage it" (1993, p. 53).

*Fictional scripture?* Revisionists Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe argue that the presence of obviously fictional material in the scriptures, such as parables, demonstrates that a text does not have to be historical to "be powerful in providing people with spiritual guidance" (2002, p. ix). Following a similar logic, Anthony Hutchinson (1993) calls the Book of Mormon a "fictional work of nineteenth-century scripture," authored by Joseph Smith under inspiration yet deeply informed by Smith's own beliefs. To Hutchinson's understanding, the Book of Mormon as fictional scripture operates for believing readers in a way comparable to how fairy tales help children make sense of themselves and the world, according to psychologist Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976).

Revisionists display different understandings—some clearer or more concrete than others—of what it means to call the Book of Mormon "scripture." Vogel and Metcalfe (2002), as well as Grant Palmer (2002), suggest that a nineteenth-century Book of Mormon can be read as a religious "allegory," but they do not specify of what. Mark Thomas writes that, regardless of its historicity, the Book of Mormon "is an authoritative text that serves as a vehicle for sacred power and ultimate value" (1991, p. 62). Hutchinson holds that the Book of Mormon is "a work of scripture inspired by God in the same way that the Bible is inspired," by which he means that "God's hand somehow was at work in bringing forth the book which gave this group of Christians [the first Mormons] their separate identity." Central to the Book of Mormon's message, for Hutchinson, is its proclamation "of a Christ whose redeeming work is addressed to all times and places, [and] of the need for humble obedience to God and for social justice" (1993, pp. 1–2, 5). For David Wright, the religious relevance of the Book of Mormon is that it offers a "window" to Joseph Smith's "internal struggles and spiritual challenges," thus helping us "understand him much more completely and . . . appreciate the foundations of the tradition he inaugurated" (1993, p. 213).

Orthodox scholars (Robinson 1989; Midgley 1990; Hamblin 1993) maintain that positions such as these reduce religion to sentimentalism—in Stephen Robinson's words, "a sugar-coated lie" (1989, p. 403). Putting an even finer point on it, John Tvedtnes (1994) protests that imagining the Book of Mormon as fictional scripture makes God a liar. William Hamblin (1994) contends that revisionists who insist that the Book of Mormon doesn't have to be ancient to be the word of God are missing the point, since what is most fundamentally at stake in historicity is not the book's status as scripture but Joseph Smith's claims to prophetic authority. As Hamblin expresses the point elsewhere: "If there were no plates, Joseph was a fraud or a lunatic. If this is the case, why follow him at all?" (1993, p. 12). Kent Jackson poses the question this way: "If [the Book of Mormon] lies repeatedly, explicitly, and deliberately regarding its own historicity . . . , what possible cause would anyone have to accept anything of the work of Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?" (2001, pp. 137–38).

The debate over the Book of Mormon as nonhistorical scripture parallels, and is informed by, debates over the historicity of the Bible descended from the modernist-fundamentalist controversies sparked by the emergence of higher criticism during the nineteenth century. The idea of reading the Book of Mormon as scripture but not historical is patterned after similar approaches to the Bible that became well established among liberal Jews and Christians during the twentieth century (Russell 1982). Orthodox LDS scholars with training in biblical studies warn Latter-day Saints not to follow a path that, as they see it, has already led liberal Christians astray (Robinson 1989; Millet 1993; Welch 1994).

*Other views.* William Hamblin (1994) divides skeptics of Book of Mormon historicity into "theistic naturalists," "secular naturalists," and "evangelicals." Theistic naturalists reject Book

of Mormon historicity yet continue to accept the book as scriptural; Anthony Hutchinson exemplifies this position. Secular naturalists reject the Book of Mormon both as historical and as scriptural because they reject belief in God. This is the position of someone who abandons Mormonism, and religion in general, to embrace something like positivist rationalism. Evangelicals deny that the Book of Mormon is either historical or scriptural but believe that the Bible is both. This is the position of Jerald and Sandra Tanner, former Mormons turned born-again Christians. One could add to Hamblin's categories individuals who leave Mormonism for liberal forms of Christianity, rejecting the Book of Mormon but accepting the Bible as nonhistorical scripture.

Jungian psychoanalyst C. Jess Groesbeck represents yet a different position. Groesbeck sees Joseph Smith as a shaman who "was able to access at a deep subconscious level all the fragmented traditions, problems, expectations, dreams, and needs of his time and place, and through the Book of Mormon, to weave them together in an immensely satisfying way" (2004, pp. 35–36). While Groesbeck's view resembles the "fictional scripture" approach, rejecting historicity while preserving a sense of the Book of Mormon as sacred text, Groesbeck moves beyond the biblical theism of revisionists like Hutchinson.

No doubt other  Latter-day Saints hold other unconventional, but unpublished, views. One individual I've met, raised LDS but now subscribing to a New Age spiritual style, professes to regard the Book of Mormon as scripture alongside texts from various world religions and metaphysical traditions.

### Relationship to the LDS Church?

THE QUESTION, "DOES the Book of Mormon need to be historical in order for it to be scripture?" overlaps with, but is not the same as, the question, "Does the Book of Mormon need to be historical in order for the Church to be true?" The relationship between one's beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity and one's commitment to the LDS Church has been understood in different ways. The dominant view makes Book of Mormon historicity a prerequisite for Church membership. Others have urged tolerance of multiple views on historicity, while some embrace the Church for reasons that have nothing to do with the Book of Mormon.

*Prerequisite for Church membership.* From the perspective of the orthodox dilemma, it would be senseless to belong to the Church if the Book of Mormon is not historical. If the book is not historical, then Joseph Smith was not an authentic prophet, which means The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not the restoration of Christ's true church and is therefore powerless to open the way to salvation. This is the logic not only of the orthodox but also of skeptics who upon rejecting historicity conclude that the Church is a sham as well.

Furthermore, if one concludes, from this logic, that to challenge Book of Mormon historicity is to attack the Church's au-thenticity and thus to undermine saving faith, it follows that members who raise such challenges are apostates who threaten to lead others astray with them (see Hamblin 1994 for one expression of this concern). Writing against Book of Mormon historicity has led to church discipline, or the threat of discipline, for Brent Metcalfe, Thomas Murphy, Grant Palmer, and David Wright, the last of whom also lost his job at BYU. Blake Ostler and other advocates of an expansion theory have thus far not faced such sanctions, suggesting that, despite the criticisms of some orthodox intellectuals, Church leaders perceive expansion theories to fall within the unmarked boundaries of LDS orthodoxy.

*Tolerance for multiple views.* Some revisionists assert that, fundamentally, it does not matter whether one believes the Book of Mormon is historical or not since it can be read as scripture in either case (A. Hutchinson 1993; Thomas 1999). Eugene England (1994, 1996), a believer in historicity, nevertheless advocated tolerance within the Church for a diversity of positions on that question. If belief in historicity mattered, England argued, God would have made the evidence clearer; what is crucial, in any event, is to heed the Book of Mormon's teachings about Christlike living.

*Mormonism without the Book of Mormon.* Some members who neither accept the Book of Mormon as historical nor defend its status as scripture nevertheless value participation in the LDS Church for other reasons. When New World archaeology enthusiast Thomas Ferguson lost his faith in historicity, he continued to believe that Mormonism was superior to other religions, and he remained active out of a commitment to the Church's social values (Larson 1996). Leonard Arrington (1985) cited Mormon ideals of community and family, free agency, and the search for knowledge as the grounds for his committing to the Church despite his indecision about the historicity of LDS faith claims. Grant Palmer (2002), having rejected Book of Mormon historicity, shows little interest in the book's teachings; but he expresses continuing love for Joseph Smith's teachings about the plan of salvation and eternal marriage, and he argues for treating the New Testament teachings of Jesus as the heart of LDS faith.

*Other Latter Day Saint churches.* Official LDS discourse promotes the view that the authenticity of the Book of Mormon leads logically to the truth of the Church's exclusive claim to divine authority: "If the Book of Mormon is true, then Joseph Smith was a true prophet. If Joseph Smith was a true prophet, then The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the Lord's Church and is guided by God" (*Missionary Guide* 1988, p. 135; see also Benson 1988; *Preach My Gospel* 2004, p. 38). Of course, this logic would be disputed by members of other Latter Day Saint denominations, such as the Community of Christ or the FLDS Church. Thus, deciding that the Book of Mormon is historical is not necessarily the same as deciding that the LDS Church is the Lord's one true church. The fact that some of the Three and Eight Witnesses later came to re-

gard Joseph Smith as a fallen prophet without rejecting belief in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon further demonstrates that one's beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity can be separated from one's beliefs about the authority of Joseph Smith or that of subsequent church leaders.

### Rethinking the historicity question

BEGINNING IN THE late 1990s, a few authors, influenced by postmodern scholarship, have argued that the historicity debates are a peculiarly modern phenomenon, meaning that all historicity debaters share assumptions that reflect the impact of the Enlightenment. By questioning those assumptions, these authors open up new ways of thinking about the historicity question.

Dennis Potter advocates what he calls a post-liberal approach to the Book of Mormon. This approach would reject the notion that "science [should] adjudicate everything about the way we see the world, including our religious beliefs" (2005, p. 73). Instead of marshalling scientific arguments for and against historicity, as apologists and skeptics alike do, Potter recommends that Latter-day Saints separate scientific discourse from the questions they ask about the Book of Mormon. One question Potter is especially keen to ask is whether the book helps Latter-day Saints liberate Native Americans.

John Williams likewise urges readers to lay aside the "question of scientific 'truth'" to examine instead the social consequences that different views on historicity have for Native Americans (2005, p. 46). Williams argues that the hemispheric model of Book of Mormon historicity seized possession of Native Americans and their identity in a way characteristic of European colonization, whereas the new preference for a limited geography constitutes a partial relinquishing of authority over Native identity. This fact leads Williams to view the limited geography as a positive development, entirely apart from the question of whether that geography is historically true.

The most elaborate—and dense—postmodern critique of the historicity debates comes from BYU philosophy professor James Faulconer (1995, 2001). Faulconer maintains that modern readers, whether apologists or skeptics, assume that the scriptures are historical, or literally true, if they refer to objectively real events, the truth of which can be assessed by evidence outside the scriptures themselves: archaeology, DNA studies, or other documents of the period. However, premodern (pre-Renaissance) readers did not make this separation between historical events and the scriptural account of those events. From a premodern point of view, Faulconer argues, the only access to literal, historical truth was the scriptures themselves because they reveal the truth of events as God understands them. By treating scriptures as texts whose truth, like that of any other text, consists in referring to objective reality, apologists for historicity actually surrender the divinity of scripture, namely its power to order the world in contrast to merely depicting the world. Faulconer urges Latter-day Saints to recover a "sacramental" vocabulary for talking about the his-

toricity of scripture. A sacramental outlook would recognize that the scriptures, like poetry, "mean without being fully able to refer" (2001, p. 42). This means, among other things, that we must expect the scriptures to surprise us with new, unexpected meanings: "We must assume that scripture means exactly what it says, and, even more important, we must assume that we do not already know what it says" (1995, p. 83).

Faulconer assures orthodox Latter-day Saints that he understands the scriptures to be "about real people and real events" (2001, p. 44). He takes issue with readings of the Book of Mormon as nonhistorical scripture because he feels that these don't avoid implying that Joseph Smith was a fraud and don't offer a clear rationale for embracing Mormonism rather than another religion. Nevertheless, could Faulconer's sacramental approach open up common ground for readers who regard the Book of Mormon as ancient scripture and readers who regard it as nineteenth-century scripture? Further discussion of Faulconer's work is needed to tease out its implications.

### CONCLUSION

THE BOOK OF Mormon historicity debates resemble debates about Bible historicity that divided twentieth-century Protestant liberals and fundamentalists. A crucial difference is that where fundamentalists lost control of the mainline Protestant denominations, orthodox LDS leaders and scholars have succeeded at stigmatizing liberal views of Book of Mormon historicity. Tolerance for positions that embrace the Book of Mormon as nonhistorical scripture, or that downplay the importance of historicity as grounds for committing to the Church, sharply declined by the end of the twentieth century. Liberal or revisionist views have been forced to the margins of the LDS community by an assertive and expanding apologetic movement, supported by General Authorities and periodically reinforced by church discipline against prominent revisionists.

However, this historical development should not entirely eclipse the fact that LDS thinking about Book of Mormon historicity has been, and continues to be, diverse. Granted that revisionists constitute a stigmatized and evidently very small minority, who differ among themselves in their understanding of the book's status as scripture. But even Latter-day Saints who accept historicity hold differing views regarding how accurately or transparently the Book of Mormon reports the ancient past or to what extent the translation process may have allowed Joseph Smith's nineteenth-century ideas to be incorporated into the text.

Because the literature on Book of Mormon historicity is so extensive—especially the literature orthodox scholars have produced in support of historicity—it is hard to believe that someone could actually decide what to think about the historicity question by impartially weighing all arguments and evidence. There is simply too much to weigh; and new arguments, and counterarguments, and rebuttals to counterarguments, are continually being produced. The presuppositions one brings to this question, prior to examining specific

arguments for or against, are a critical factor in influencing how open one is to the arguments made on behalf of a certain position.

Part Two of this article will analyze these presuppositions. There I will "map" the Book of Mormon historicity question using social constructionist theories about how people form beliefs and interpret texts. This sociological mapping will highlight the role that relationships with other people play in forming an individual's beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity. Part Two will also underscore the consequences that those beliefs have for a person's relationships. I will propose that grappling with the arguments mapped in Part One is not, actually, the most important task for someone trying to decide whether or not the Book of Mormon is historically true.  ☖

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PAT BAGLEY, TREASURES OF HALF TRUTH
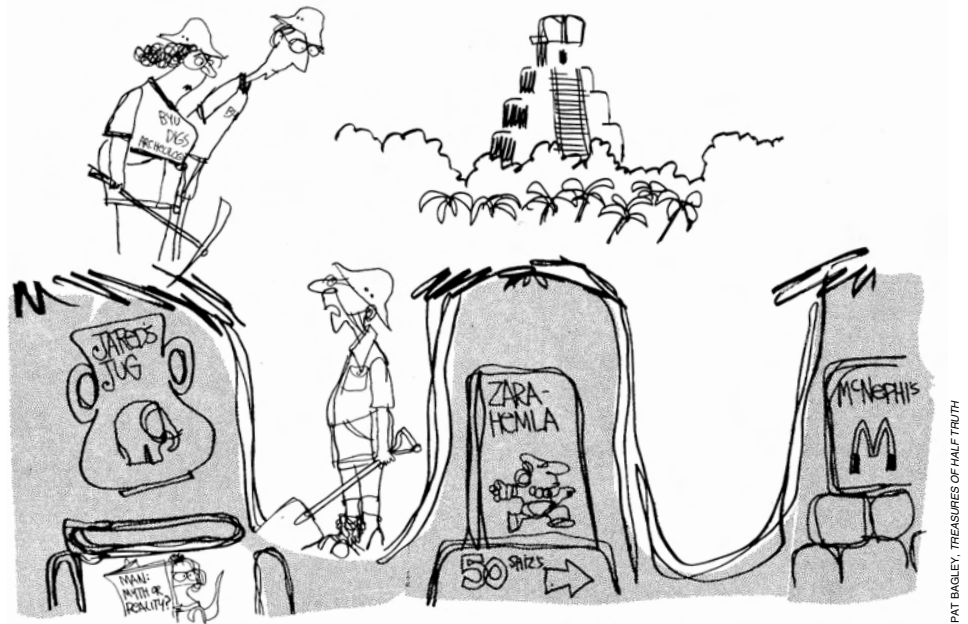
"I've looked everywhere and I haven't found any evidence of a Book of Mormon civilization in America."

CALVIN GRONDAHL, *SUNDAY'S FOYER*

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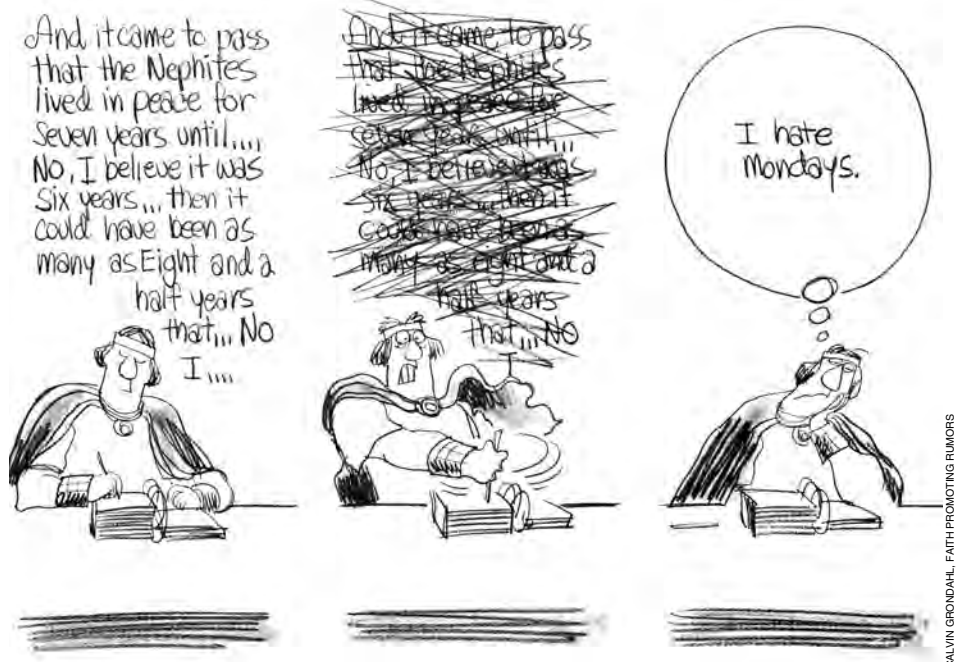
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