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Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*

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Abstract Review of *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon* (1990), by Jerald and Sandra Tanner.

Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1990. 164 pp. \$5.00.

Reviewed by L. Ara Norwood

There is to be an opposition in all things. In mortality, there will always be darkness to contemn light, falsehood to challenge truth, and the proud to point the finger of scorn at the Saints (1 Nephi 8:33). This is part of the plan of God, a necessary part of our time of testing while on this earth.

Thus, it should not come as any surprise when individuals seek every means of sophistry to discredit truth. One of the more recent attempts to cast a dull shadow of doubt on the Book of Mormon is the publication under review here. The husband-and-wife team of Jerald and Sandra Tanner has added yet another title to their anti-Mormon arsenal. Yet, like Ananias and Sapphira of old (see Acts 5), they have withheld much—in this case, much evidence—which ultimately weakens their hypothesis. Yet many have come to expect this from the Tanners, who have a long history of writing a steady stream of polemics against anything and everything Mormon. Although they have tried in recent years to gain acceptance as serious students of Mormon history and doctrine, they remain to Mormon literature what the tabloids are to journalism.

In this review, I will enumerate a few of the examples I have found where additional evidence was avoided by the Tanners—evidence which, if taken into account, would more than cast doubt on their thesis.¹

The Black Hole theory is not a new one, but only a detailed restatement of an old Fawn Brodie theory that attempts to explain away the Book of Mormon. Since the world simply cannot and will not accept the book on its own terms, critics from the earliest days of the restoration have sought to devise alternate explanations for its existence. The Tanners' act is not the newest and is sure to be followed by many more players, all

¹ The Tanners' Black Hole theory is contained in Part 1 of their book. Part 2, which contains examples of what they feel are plagiarisms from the Bible in the Book of Mormon, will not be addressed in this review, due to space limitations. A shorter discussion of their theory is in their *Salt Lake City Messenger* 72 (July 1989), 16 pages.

seeking center stage where they can "take their brief bows in the secular spotlight."²

What is the Black Hole theory of the Book of Mormon? It all begins with the episode of the loss of the first 116 pages of manuscript, which constituted the book of Lehi. The Tanners are certain that the tenor and style of these pages were very similar to the material which now comprises Mosiah through Moroni. At the same time, they feel the material in these pages was very different from the current portion that eventually replaced the lost pages (i.e., 1 Nephi through Words of Mormon). In this they are undoubtedly correct.³

The Tanners charge that, since the Book of Mormon text from Mosiah through Moroni contains great detail on names, places, geographic directions, dates, and the like, and since the lost book of Lehi must also have also contained the same sort of detail, and since the small plates of Nephi which replaced it are sparse in those kinds of details, Joseph Smith (who, in the Tanner's mind, was obviously a fraud from the start) must have written the small plates "translation" in a style radically different from the large plates in order to avoid detection in the event that the lost 116 pages turned up. In other words, it would have been dangerous and foolhardy for Joseph Smith to try to replace the lost pages with an exact reproduction, for it would have been impossible for anyone without prophetic gifts to reproduce a verbatim transcript. If Joseph made the attempt to do so and the lost pages turned up, the differences might be apparent upon comparison, and the credibility of Joseph Smith as a prophetic figure could be ruined; thus, the need for a replacement that just happens to be as vague and imprecise as possible. Hence comes the idea that the small plates would have to deal with historical details very scantily (see Jacob 1:4). It is this vague nature of the small plates that, in the Tanners' minds, constitutes a "black hole" in the Book of Mormon.

A central assertion of the Black Hole theory is that "the entire Book of Mormon is . . . lacking a significant number of important things that should be there if the book were really a history of ancient Jewish people in the New World" (p. 46; cf. pp. 59-63). The Tanners spend several pages identifying just

² Neal A. Maxwell, "The Net Gathers of Every Kind," *Ensign* 10 (November 1980): 14.

³ 1 Nephi 9:2-4 and Jacob 1:1-2, 4, seem to indicate that the contents of the small plates were different from that of the large plates.

what "should be there," which, in their view, includes items involving measurements, a monetary system,⁴ the names of various colors, and items or issues of a personal nature (i.e., romance, divorce, how women dealt with pregnancy, and even the way in which Jesus interacted with people). They then analyze both the Bible and the Book of Mormon to see how much each of them mentions a wide variety of words or ideas associated with such things as lodging, furniture, food, illness, death and burial, royalty, and music.

The Tanners follow a rather predictable and flawed pattern in their analysis. First, they choose several words or concepts that fall in a given category. Then they count how many times those words or ideas are mentioned in the Bible and in the Book of Mormon. (In every instance, they find the carefully selected idea or word mentioned more often in the Bible than in the Book of Mormon.) In many instances, they determine that the Book of Mormon reference is actually borrowed from the Bible, and it is therefore discounted. In other instances, they determine that the Book of Mormon reference only uses the term symbolically or in a different context, so these are discounted as well. Thus, when most of the Book of Mormon references have been filtered out, they compare the remaining few references (if any) to the corresponding biblical references and conclude that the Book of Mormon does not match up in terms of the number of times certain things are mentioned. Here is one typical conclusion: since the Bible mentions *food* much more frequently than does the Book of Mormon, the latter could not possibly be an ancient record.⁵ This is hardly convincing evidence!

In characteristic fashion, they carefully avoid mentioning the numerous Jewish features in the Book of Mormon—many of which have been published and available for years.⁶ The

⁴ The Tanners are apparently not aware of a F.A.R.M.S. preliminary report entitled "Nephite Weights and Measures in the Time of Mosiah II," which offsets their offhanded comments such as, "the [monetary] scheme set forth in the Book of Mormon would lead to chaos" (p. 50). This is, moreover, a curious comment coming from the Tanners, since they claim, on the same page, that they "do not pretend to have any great knowledge concerning monetary systems."

⁵ How the presence of *food* in the Book of Mormon would contribute to its stated purpose of the "convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ" escapes me.

⁶ An example is John A. Tvedtnes, "King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles," in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *By*

Tanners also feel that, if the Book of Mormon were a valid record of Jewish peoples, it would contain much information on the Passover, feasts, new moons, the Sabbath day, circumcision, tithing, the temple, and so forth. Since it does not, according to the Tanners, it is obviously the fabrication of Joseph Smith. While one can understand the Tanners' surprise, they reach hasty and naive conclusions. Following their reasoning, one must be consistent and declare as fabrication the fifth-century Jewish documents from Elephantine in Upper Egypt. The Jewish colony there (like one later in Lower Egypt) built a temple for traditional animal sacrifice and other offerings and rites. Yet their papyri never mention the Exodus, Moses, the Law, Levites, the Sabbath, and the like.⁷ Does it make sense to dismiss the Book of Mormon for its alleged failure to discuss certain concepts found in the Bible when they are lacking in the Elephantine writings as well? But, in fact, the Tanners have overstated this supposed deficiency in the Book of Mormon.

The Tanners have a tendency to raise questions that, with a little more thought, need not have been raised in the first place. For instance, on page 17 they mention the fact that, according to Jacob 1:11, all of Nephi's successors to the throne took on the royal name-title of "Nephi," but when we come to the large plates, we find kings Benjamin and Mosiah with no indication that they had any such name-title. The Tanners go on to speculate that Joseph Smith must have devised this "scheme" so as to avoid having to come up with the actual names of the kings in the small plates, since "it is very possible that Joseph Smith forgot the name[s] he had given" (p. 17).

It must be remembered that when kings Mosiah and Benjamin were on the scene, the Nephites had already merged with the Mulekite nation. Since the Nephites were in the minority it is possible that the older system for naming kings had

Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 2:197-237.

⁷ Unleavened Bread is the only Jewish feast specifically mentioned in the papyri (and Passover, if it is to be restored in a fragmentary part of one of the papyri), although the Sabbath "is to be found in the ostraca, letters about personal affairs." Bezalel Porten, *Archives from Elephantine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 126. Cf. Arthur E. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), 60-65, and Harold I. Bell, *Cults and Creeds in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Liverpool, 1954), 28.

been abandoned. The Nephite practice of naming the kings after their first king took place in the land of Nephi, and the Nephite/Mulekite kings were now in a different land altogether (Zarahemla). Hence, it need not strike one as odd or suspicious that some of the former customs of the Nephites might go through a transition.

Another issue that comes up is their treatment of Jacob 5. They make several telltale comments, such as that "it was obviously taken from the Apostle Paul's writings found in Romans 11:17-24 and from statements made by Jesus" (p. 24). They also claim the material in Jacob 5 is merely filler, and they claim it "is probably the most repetitious and uninteresting part of the Book of Mormon." To support their views, they then go on to quote the now-deceased Wesley Walters (another anti-Mormon) who describes the allegory as "perplex[ing]" and "bewilder[ing]."⁸

Both the Tanners' and Walters's comments on Jacob 5 are superficial. They fail to point out many important things which have been known by scholars for a number of years. For instance, Hugh Nibley, Robert F. Smith, Blake T. Ostler, and others have argued that the parable in Jacob 5 has parallels in other ancient (nonbiblical) works unknown to Joseph Smith.⁹

Additional superficiality appears in a comment they make on page 23 regarding 1 Nephi 20-21, which they claim is also

⁸ Walters's terminology is far different from that of the Tanners; "repetitious and uninteresting" is a far cry from "perplex[ing] and bewilder[ing]," which in some instances could be meant in a respectful and complimentary sense.

⁹ Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, vol. 7 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 283-85; Robert F. Smith, "Oracles & Talismans, Forgery & Pansophia: Joseph Smith as a Renaissance Magus," August 1987 draft, 177-78; Blake T. Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Spring 1987): 68; *Book of Mormon Critical Text: A Tool for Scholarly Reference*, 3 vols. (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1986-87), 1:311-28. For a devotional approach, see Ralph E. Swiss, "The Tame and Wild Olive Trees," *Ensign* 18 (August 1988): 50-52; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 4:141, 203-6. For the assessment of a professional horticulturalist, see Wilford M. Hess, "Botanical Comparisons in the Allegory of the Olive Tree," in Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds., *The Book of Mormon: Jacob through the Words of Mormon, To Learn with Joy* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 87-102.

filler. Even though the material is claimed to be taken from the brass plates, to the Tanners "it is obvious to anyone who takes the time to critically examine the matter that the material really comes from the 48th and 49th chapters of the book of Isaiah." But how "critically" did the Tanners examine the material? Did they do much more than read the chapter headings to the Book of Mormon chapters in question, which openly alert the reader to the Isaiah parallels? Nibley dealt with this very issue over twenty years ago and, in doing so, vindicated the Book of Mormon as a translated work.¹⁰ Are the Tanners unaware of Nibley's work? Or worse, are they going to claim that his work is irrelevant? If so, they must assume the task of explaining how his work is flawed. Until then, one is justified in questioning the Tanners' motives for ignoring (or withholding) some rather pertinent evidence.

The Tanners also ignore various striking examples of textual consistency between the small and large plates, some of which have been published. How is it, for example, that Alma is able to openly quote Lehi in Alma 36:22, when the source in 1 Nephi 1:8 does not yet exist? And how could 3 Nephi 8 be a fulfillment of Zenos's prophecy in 1 Nephi 19:11-12, if the latter was composed last by a Joseph Smith desperate to replace the lost 116 pages?¹¹ The speed of translation alone makes it highly improbable that these and other such internal consistencies were concocted or coordinated.¹²

The Tanners comment on the visit of Christ to the Nephite people in Bountiful (p. 52). Although it is one of the most illuminating passages in the Book of Mormon, it brings to the Tanners' minds "a production line in a factory." The Tanners then go on to quote M. T. Lamb, another anti-Mormon, who makes several mocking comments about the event, claiming that it is a

farce, to suppose five persons could thus pass the Savior every minute, giving each one only twelve seconds to thrust his hand into the side and feel the print of the nails both in his hands and in his feet.

¹⁰ Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 113-18. See also Sidney B. Sperry, "The Book of Mormon and Textual Criticism," in *Book of Mormon Institute* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1959), 1-8.

¹¹ F.A.R.M.S. Update, "Textual Consistency," October 1987.

¹² F.A.R.M.S. Update, "How Long Did It Take to Translate the Book of Mormon?" February 1986.

But at this rapid rate it would require just eight hours and twenty minutes of time!!

Speculative and irreverent comments such as these are as useless to our understanding of the Book of Mormon as they are brazen. We simply don't know the particulars of that event, and to assume we do is to overstate the facts.¹³

On pages 63-71, the Tanners spend a great deal of time discussing the fact that Jesus' name appears in the Book of Mormon during the pre-Christian era.¹⁴ While space will not allow me to discuss all of the ramifications of this important issue, one comment they make is noteworthy. On page 66, the Tanners cite the book of Moses to the effect that Adam was informed by revelation that the name of the Son of God was "Jesus Christ." The Tanners feel this

presents a very serious problem to those who are familiar with the development of language. How could two Greek words derived from two Hebrew words possibly be in existence at that period of time when neither Hebrew nor Greek were in existence?

But Joseph's use of the words Jesus Christ in this instance simply represents his best effort to express in his language (i.e., nineteenth-century American English) the meaning of the words revealed by God to Adam, whatever they may have been in the language of Adam. It should be clear, too, that any rendering of words or ideas from ancient times into a modern language must necessarily use words that would have been unavailable anciently. This is as true of a modern translation of Cicero, Aeschylus, or Confucius as it is of Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon or of the words revealed to him in the book of Moses.

¹³ Suppose, for example, that five people went forth every twelve seconds (to use the Lamb/Tanner model) but each one felt only one wound. If five people went forth at one time (each examining either a hand, a foot, or the side) then the whole event took less than two hours. There is a wide difference between "less than two hours" and "eight hours and twenty minutes." Again, we simply do not know the details of the event, only that it occurred. As usual, the Tanners apply one set of standards in judging the Book of Mormon, and a wholly different set in examining the Bible.

¹⁴ This is yet another issue already dealt with by Nibley. See *Since Cumorah*, 167-68.

In a sense, the Tanners are helpful in that they raise questions on occasion that force one to study the Book of Mormon from an angle one might have overlooked. For instance, the Tanners make note (p. 65) of the fact that the title "Christ" was on the small plates (see 2 Nephi 10:3), but then in the book of Mosiah, Benjamin reports learning the name of Christ via revelation from an angel (see Mosiah 3:2, 8). The Tanners raise a valid question: "Why would king Benjamin have to receive a special revelation informing him of the name of Christ if the plates of Nephi already contained this information?"

The answer can be found by careful study of both passages. In the case of Benjamin, we find that a great deal more than the name of Christ is revealed. For instance, in Mosiah 3, we discover that Benjamin learned many things from the angel concerning the ministry of Jesus that he could not have learned from reading 2 Nephi chapter 10. Specifically, Benjamin was told by the angel that, during the atonement, blood would come from every pore (2 Nephi 10:7), that Christ's full title would be "the father of heaven and earth, the creator of all things from the beginning," and that the Savior's mother would be called Mary (2 Nephi 10:8), that salvation would come through faith on his name (2 Nephi 10:9), that he would be resurrected on the third day (2 Nephi 10:10), that he would judge the world (2 Nephi 10:10), that his blood would atone for all unintentional sins (2 Nephi 10:11), and that his name would be preached to all nations (2 Nephi 10:13).¹⁵

This is much more information than Benjamin could have received from the revelation Jacob recorded in 2 Nephi 10.¹⁶ But even if it were not, Benjamin, as an independent witness, had every reason to record his sacred experience—just as the various gospel writers in the New Testament had every reason to record their overlapping testimonies of the life of Christ.

Another tendency of the Tanners is to draw premature conclusions from ambiguous evidence. On page 62 they cite Mosiah 2:3 to the effect that firstlings were used by the Nephite/Mulekite peoples as burnt offerings according to the law of Moses. They then go on to quote their anti-Mormon

¹⁵ I am indebted to John W. Welch for pointing out these items to me.

¹⁶ I am sure the Tanners would respond by saying that, while Benjamin may not have found the material in 2 Nephi 10, he could have found some of it elsewhere in the small plates, but the majority of the revelation to Benjamin is actually unique.

predecessor, M. T. Lamb, to the effect that firstlings were never used as burnt (holocaust) offerings in the Mosaic system. And they are right. They therefore conclude that "the author of the Book of Mormon . . . was unfamiliar with the biblical material concerning offerings." And the Tanners apparently share the conclusions of Mr. Lamb: "This one little blunder . . . proves beyond the chance of question that the Book of Mormon could not have been inspired."

But have the Tanners (or M. T. Lamb) considered other possibilities? For instance, have they considered that it is the prophet/historian Mormon who wrote those words in Mosiah 2:3? Have they considered that Mormon, who lived hundreds of years after the Mosaic law was fulfilled, may not have been clear himself on the particulars of Mosaic sacrifice? It is entirely possible that Mormon, after reviewing the records left by Mosiah and abridging them, may have incorrectly recorded just how their various sacrifices took place. If that seems unlikely, consider the following:

In researching this issue, I spoke to perhaps a dozen people who, I thought, would have known the answer to the simple question, "Were firstlings ever used as burnt offerings under the Law of Moses?" I posed that question to various professors of Hebrew and Old Testament as well as several Jewish rabbis. Only one knew the answer: a professor at a major Western university, an eminent scholar of priestly law. I then consulted several Old Testament commentaries and Bible dictionaries, but my quick search turned up nothing. This tells me that the question covers a rather obscure issue that might have been as unfamiliar to Mormon as it was to the various professors and rabbis with whom I spoke.

Another possible solution comes to mind when one studies the text of Mosiah 2:3, which reads as follows: "And they also took of the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice and burnt offerings according to the law of Moses." After I discussed this verse with the above-mentioned scholar, he wondered aloud whether the firstlings mentioned in Mosiah had reference to the sacrifice, the burnt offerings, or both. I pointed out that I felt they referred to both, yet he was hesitant to agree with me; he seemed to feel that, based on his experience in interpreting biblical texts, there was just enough ambiguity in the passage to cause hesitation in making quick and final conclusions as to just what the firstlings were being used for aside from sacrifices (apart from burnt offerings) under the law

of Moses.¹⁷ Thus, if this distinguished Jewish scholar, who possesses a comprehensive understanding of ancient texts dealing with the law of Moses, is not quick to condemn passages such as Mosiah 2:3, how can the Tanners be confident that they have settled the issue once and for all?

The Tanners not only ignore the complementary parallelism possible in Mosiah 2:3, but also miss the context of that verse as merely part of a dependent list of reasons for the gathering of everyone to the temple of Zarahemla beginning at Mosiah 2:1 and concluding at Mosiah 2:3. Thus, the people of Zarahemla were gathering to hear King Benjamin speak the appropriate words and to offer blood and holocaust offerings in accordance with the Mosaic code. The clause about firstlings does not, in the light of typical ambiguities of this sort in the Bible, tell us that they were making holocaust (wholly burnt) offerings of their firstlings.¹⁸

One last problem is worth mentioning. The Tanners have a tendency to be less than forthcoming in their use of statistical evidence. This tendency is seen or sensed all through their writings. One example that comes to mind is their analysis of the allegedly "impersonal" nature of the Book of Mormon (pp. 51-52.) In one portion of their study, they contend that the Book of Mormon does not discuss the dwelling places of its people as often as does the Bible:

Although they are missing through the period of the black hole, the Book of Mormon eventually says that the ancient inhabitants of the New World had "houses." The computer shows that the words *house, houses, home or homes* are used 244 times in the Book of Mormon. This is rather low when compared with the Bible which has 2,210 instances where the words *house, houses* or *home* appear (the Bible does not have the plural form of *home*). Most of the 244 places in the Book of Mormon where these words are found do not refer to actual structures

¹⁷ *Book of Mormon Critical Text*, 2:362-363. Note also Exodus 12:1-13, 21-23, on the partially burned Passover sacrifice to the Lord in commemoration of the Angel of Death passing over the firstborn of animals and men protected by lambs' blood (see also Exodus 13:15, Luke 2:23).

¹⁸ Jeremiah 7:21-22 is a similar passage which indicates that sacrifice and burnt offerings are two separate types of offerings and that they can appear in complementary rather than synonymous parallel.

where people live. For instance, 136 of these occurrences mention either the "house of Israel" or the "house of Jacob." (pp. 51-52)

One is justified in wondering if any of the 2,210 biblical references above also include references to the "house of Israel" or the "house of Jacob." And although the entire issue of dwelling places is not decisive, when one discovers that more than 200 of the above biblical references do, in fact, refer to the "house of Israel" or the "house of Jacob," one cannot help wondering just how often the Tanners are guilty of padding.

This is not a work of serious scholarship. On the surface, the Black Hole theory is interesting, yet the deeper one digs into the underlying assumptions and premises of the argument, as well as the specific evidence presented, the harder it becomes to take their conclusion seriously.

After reading *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*, I am reminded of a rather poignant couplet:

Two men looked through prison bars
One saw mud, the other saw stars.

That this couplet applies here should be apparent. Metaphorically, one man casts his eyes down, one up. One sees nothing but filth and dirt and darkness, but the other peers through the darkness and sees the beauty of light—stars shimmering in the distance. The one has nothing of value to speak of; the other has hope. While the Tanners often see mud,¹⁹ while they hear little more than the din of a "production line in a factory" (52), the spiritually discerning and intellectually thoughtful soul sees a second witness of the majesty of the Messiah.

Reading this book brought to mind a court of law. Imagine hearing a case where the only arguments presented were those by the prosecution. If no defense was heard, the jury would get a very lopsided picture of the facts. But the Tanners, certain that they have the Book of Mormon figured out, seem more than confident that theirs is the only side worth hearing: "We feel that the evidence we now have against the authenticity of the Book of Mormon is at least a thousand times as strong as

¹⁹ Lawrence Foster, "Career Apostates: Reflections on the Works of Jerald and Sandra Tanner," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 (Summer 1984): 52.

TANNER AND TANNER, *COVERING UP THE BLACK HOLE* (NORWOOD) 169
the textual evidence we had against the Hofmann documents" (p.
75).²⁰

Yet when the student examines all pertinent studies available on the Book of Mormon,²¹ he or she cannot help but be impressed that it is one of the most singular documents available to mankind today. And when that knowledge is augmented by a source that goes beyond human understanding, beyond intellect or scholarship, then one understands why I boldly claim that the Book of Mormon is the greatest and most important book currently on the face of the earth. It is a book that is turned to again and again to better the lot of humankind. Its precepts are God-inspired, its principles are correct, and its witness of the supremacy of Christ is unsurpassed.

²⁰ One is tempted to wonder why the Tanners aren't confident that their evidence against the Book of Mormon is a *million* times as strong.

²¹ The F.A.R.M.S. catalog is an excellent resource for many of these studies.