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The Radical Reformation of the Reorganization of the Restoration: Recent Changes in the RLDS Understanding of the Book of Mormon

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Beginning in the 1960s, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS [now Community of Christ]) has modified its understanding of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic charisms. Where the RLDS were earlier permitted to read the Book of Mormon as nineteenth-century fiction, they are now encouraged by their leaders to do so, though they are still permitted to find in it, if they wish, some inspiring passages. These changes have been resisted by a conservative minority that has lost the battle for control of the Reorganization and now tends to worship outside RLDS congregations. A few Latter-day Saints have also begun to read the Book of Mormon as fiction. Their efforts to turn the Book of Mormon into nineteenth-century fiction have been opposed by competent Latter-day Saint scholarship, though not without resistance from those who control independent and liberal publishing ventures.
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of the Book of Mormon

Louis Midgley

Abstract: Beginning in the 1960s, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) has modified its understanding of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's prophetic charisms. Where the RLDS were earlier permitted to do this, they are now encouraged by their leaders to read the Book of Mormon as nineteenth-century fiction, though they are still permitted to find in it, if they wish, some inspiring passages. These changes have been resisted by a conservative minority that has lost the battle for control of the Reorganization and now tends to worship outside RLDS congregations. A few Latter-day Saints have also begun to read the Book of Mormon as fiction. Their efforts to turn the Book of Mormon into nineteenth-century fiction have been opposed by competent Latter-day Saint scholarship, though not without resistance from those who control "independent" and "liberal" publishing ventures.

In spite of considerable subtle and now some increasingly overt institutional pressure to modify their traditional understanding and even deeply held beliefs, some present and former members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (hereafter RLDS or Reorganization)1 clinging to...
the Book of Mormon, believing it is an authentic ancient text, as well as the word of God. In 1966, when the pressure to modify their understanding of the Book of Mormon first began, those within the Reorganization who were then zealous about that book chartered the Foundation for Research on Ancient America (FRAA). Whatever else that might be said about it, the persistence of FRAA is noteworthy, especially given the continuing efforts from within the RLDS bureaucracy and hierarchy to alter the understanding of the Book of Mormon. While these efforts have not, at least to this point, been aimed at removing the Book of Mormon from the canon of the Reorganization, they are, as we shall see, clearly aimed at portraying the Book of Mormon as something other than an authentic ancient text, thereby clearly implying radical modifications in how (or even if) it might still be considered somehow genuinely normative for the community of faith and memory.

I called attention to these efforts to modify the RLDS stance on the Book of Mormon in some detail in 1991,2 and I will not repeat that account here. Instead, I will demonstrate that there is more to the story than could be reported in that essay. The radical shift that I will describe in the RLDS understanding of the Book of Mormon is not, however, an isolated event; it is part of a package of larger changes going on among the RLDS.

**A Hostile Takeover**

According to William D. (Bill) Russell, “for the past thirty years or so there has been a deepening theological division within the ranks of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of..."
Latter Day Saints.” This increasingly formalized and grinding separation of contentious factions appears to many devout believers to constitute something remarkably like what Harold Bloom has recently called a “hostile takeover” when describing analogous power moves by those he labels “Neo-Fundamentalists” (or “Know-Nothing ministers, many of whom border on functional illiteracy”) in the Southern Baptist Convention.

There are now at least fifteen thousand and perhaps as many as thirty thousand thoroughly marginalized former RLDS who assemble in what they tend to call Independent Restoration Branches, which constitute separate congregations of RLDS who have removed themselves (or have been removed) from the official RLDS congregations and now operate independently, often after those holding priesthood offices have been “silenced” by the liberal establishment by having their priesthood licenses lifted. While apparently still remaining on the RLDS membership rolls, they hold their own meetings, conduct weddings, elect officers, administer “communion,” baptize, and ordain, all without official authorization (Russell, Let Contention Cease, 134). Russell, in Let Contention Cease, 134, cf. 139, claims to “have identified more than 200 independent local groups in thirty-two states, Canada and Australia.” Some of these people have gone further than meeting in independent branches and have formed numerous small dissenting sects each claiming (or awaiting) what they consider the authority vacated by the dominant RLDS faction. The number assembling in such independent branches may seem relatively insignificant until it is realized that at the end of 1990 the RLDS reported having 244,186 total World Church members, 150,935 of whom were living in the United States; cf. Saints Herald 138/8 (1991): 311–12.

Harold Bloom, The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 230. Bloom, Yale University literary polymath, in one of his picturesque rhetorical tirades against religion in America, unctuously describes “the deep sorrow, sometimes despair, of the young Southern Baptists, both clergy and lay persons, who study at the Yale Divinity School”—they are anguished. “To have one’s denomination taken away from one by another, on the analogue of a hostile takeover in the corporate world, is clearly an extraordinary experience.” He describes the dramatic victory of a faction of Southern Baptists commonly known as Fundamentalists over a more moderate clergy. The label “fundamentalist” originally derived from a series of tracts known as The Fundamentals issued by a group of conservative evangelical churchmen be-

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Beginning even in the early sixties, there was evidence that elements within the RLDS hierarchy and bureaucracy were willing to allow and even promote the setting in place of a radically new understanding of the Book of Mormon as part of a concerted effort to move the Reorganization in the direction of liberal Protestantism. Of course, more than just an understanding of the Book of Mormon has been challenged. Hence, to devout, traditional RLDS, the events of the last three decades appear as a series of calamities for their faith-community.6

In the struggle that has been taking place for three decades, if Bill Russell is correct,7 power within the RLDS movement beginning in 1910 and eventually having an impact on most American Protestantism in one way or another and to greater or lesser degrees. Fundamentalism as such seems to have had no impact on the Latter-day Saints. Hence, the label “fundamentalist,” in the Mormon context, refers to polygamist sects and not to a recent movement similar to that found in Protestant circles.

6 Let Contention Cease—one wonders whether this is a request or a command—offers some valuable insights into both internal RLDS politics and currently fashionable RLDS ideology essentially from the perspective of the dominant “liberal” establishment. However, two authors, Bill Russell (see his “The Fundamentalist Schism,” in Let Contention Cease, 125–51) and the Reverend Larry W. Conrad, once RLDS, but now a pastor in the United Methodist Church (see his “Dissent among the Dissenters,” in Let Contention Cease, 199–239), include essays that are sympathetic with at least the plight of traditional believers.

was initially sought by a group of Protestant seminary-trained theological "liberals,"8 who initially infiltrated the bureaucracy (and Graceland College, the small RLDS school in Lamoni, Iowa) and then eventually gained the confidence of the hierarchy,9 finally wresting control of RLDS institutional machinery from traditional believers.10 W. B. "Pat" Spillman argues that when the RLDS were "largely rural," the tendency was for them to sympathize with "an exaggerated biblical literalism" and hence they manifested "disdain for the 'teachings of men,' which they saw as threatening the basis of their faith." But, where once the RLDS were rural folk, they are now urban. And where their clergy once lacked "formal education," the leaders of the Reorganization now expect "greater expertise and professionalism from its full-time ministers," and they look "increasingly to secular institutions and seminaries of other faiths to obtain the

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8 While these people are described as "liberal" this does not necessarily mean that they are tolerant of differing views, once they have gained power. On this point, see Paul M. Edwards, "Ethics and Dissent in Mormonism," in Let Contention Cease, 241–57. In one of the clearest passages in his rather confused and confusing essay, Edwards writes: "For the Reorganized Church there is considerable smoke for a fairly small fire; for the Mormons [Latter-day Saints] not even much smoke. Reorganized Church dissenters will stay longer in the structure, but in the final analysis they will find the need to be outside." Edwards senses that the institutional imperative, to which he now almost reluctantly bows, is to push the liberal agenda only moderately, in order to minimize disaffection if not dissent. Hence, "the more popular middle-of-the-road responses to the central ideas of our time [those ideas driving the new 'liberal' establishment?] leave us driving one additional nail into the coffins of Mormon dissent. As dutiful followers not only of the church but of the social fads of our civilization, we seek to manage the behavior of the church and in so doing leave behind the passionate source of our dissent" (252–53). By "our dissent" he seems to have in mind his early dissent from the traditional RLDS stance. But those days are now over and it is time for the liberals to consolidate power; hence, dissent is now a naughty word, except in nostalgic recollections by the old master dissenter himself, Paul M. Edwards.

required training.”

What such shifts produced, according to Spillman, was "perhaps unconscious accommodation to the standards and values of the United States' middle class." "For a variety of reasons the [RLDS] church began to de-emphasize its most unique aspects and stress those more characteristic of 'orthodox' Christian denominations. It particularly played down its historic 'one true church' claim." The RLDS began "providing more substantial support for its leaders and their families"; they "gradually improved its appointee [professional clergy] family allowances and instituted attractive fringe benefits such as fully equipped church automobiles, total medical care, college tuition reimbursement for dependents, and a relatively generous retirement plan." All this is possible, according to Spillman, because "the [RLDS] church in North America is no longer constituted largely of lower and working class families." The RLDS church now demonstrates what he calls "considerable wealth." Spillman boasts that "the Temple project in Independence is undoubtedly a measure of the church's aggregate influence. Within the space of two years, a church with fewer than 51,000 contributing members raised more than $40 million toward a project expected to cost at least $75 million for its completion."

As indications of an RLDS coming-of-age, Spillman reports that "in the Reorganized Church evidence of reduced tension and increased accommodation to society is... present. The First Presidency's support of ecumenical efforts is only one of many theological indicators of social accommodation. Though still officially proscribed, open communion is tolerated, even defended, in some Reorganized Church congregations. While the Book of Mormon is still revered and quoted, the church permits open criticism of traditional accounts of its origin and its theology." Finally, "the cherished concept of Zion itself has become increasingly vague and less compelling to leaders and members alike." Like his colleagues, Spillman attributes these

12 Ibid., 272.
13 Ibid., 270.
14 Ibid., 274.
15 Ibid., 276.
16 The title of the second volume of Richard P. Howard's The Church through the Years is The Reorganization Comes of Age.
17 Spillman, "Dissent and the Future of the Church," 281–82.
developments to the "upward social mobility of the church" as it moves increasingly toward an accommodation with the world.\textsuperscript{18} The RLDS, starting out as a lower-class, poorly educated, rural sect, have now gradually lost "their sense of 'over-and-against-ness.'" As they have moved up the social and economic ladder, they have sought an accommodation with the larger, more glamorous, and presumably sophisticated elements of the dominant culture. Hence, "Reorganized Church members cannot deny that substantial change in what some people regard as essential doctrine and practice has occurred and will continue to occur in the future."\textsuperscript{19} Why were the liberals successful in their takeover of the Reorganized Church? Spillman's answer: "Long experience confirms that power resides at the level where the money is,"\textsuperscript{20} and since the liberals, at least from their own perspective, tend to be better educated and have more wealth than their unsophisticated but more orthodox fellow churchmen, they have won in the resulting struggle for power in the RLDS community. And if the unsophisticated, rural, less educated and less-wealthy primitive believers do not like it, they are free to leave. Spillman uses a metaphor usually employed to describe the breakup of families: "While 'divorce' is rarely a pleasant prospect, over the long term, some separations and divorces may be regarded as inevitable."\textsuperscript{21}

This takeover has led to radical alterations of traditional RLDS understandings and outright abandonment of others. Transformations have gradually taken place in the RLDS understanding of the Book of Mormon,\textsuperscript{22} Joseph Smith and his

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 282.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 285.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 287.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 289. In addition, Donald J. Breckon's essay entitled "The Politics of Dissent and the Reorganized Church," in \textit{Let Contention Cease}, 153–76, tells a similar tale in a different vocabulary.
prophetic roll,23 his visions,24 what constitutes divine revelation,25 the book of Abraham,26 priesthood,27 the temple and


whether it should include ordinances such as baptism for the dead,\textsuperscript{28} the gathering and Zion,\textsuperscript{29} whether there should be an open communion with members of other Christian groups or denominations,\textsuperscript{30} whether there was an apostasy and hence a genuine restoration of anything authentically ancient,\textsuperscript{31} and what constitutes “authority” and even a “church.” All of these, and more, have undergone and are undergoing sometimes radical reinterpretation by the regnant establishment. In addition, the “liberals” are clearly intent on concentrating power now that they have it within their grasp. However, one significant obstacle to such an undertaking has been the traditional understanding of the RLDS past,\textsuperscript{32} and especially of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith and his prophetic claims.

\begin{itemize}
\item Edwards put the matter bluntly: if Mormonism really wants freedom of expression, then that kind of change might “necessarily be the end of the movement—perhaps not the end of the institution but of the community. If the Mormon movement is defined by its tradition and its prescription, then to stand in dissent is to want it to be that which it is not.” Edwards senses a dilemma: “I personally believe dissent is good because I do not want Mormonism—or any other institution—running loose upon the
RLDS historians have sensed that, since the texts upon which accounts of the past necessarily rest are interpretations of events and since all subsequent accounts are also interpretations, that a radical reshaping of the RLDS understanding of their past is both possible and necessary in order to reconstitute the RLDS community more fully along liberal Protestant lines.\(^{33}\) Hence, the recent history of the RLDS by Richard P. Howard,\(^{34}\) as well as the one by Paul M. Edwards,\(^{35}\) are best seen as sustained efforts to recast the RLDS understanding of their past in ways more congenial with the ideology currently being espoused by the RLDS hierarchy and bureaucracy. In order to accommodate radical changes in traditional beliefs, the RLDS liberal establishment has found it desirable—perhaps even necessary—to refashion the traditional account of the Reorganization from its beginning in 1851 to the present, but, more importantly, to provide a new understanding of those portions of their past that they share with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Of course, the most interesting and instructive modifications in the RLDS understanding of the Mormon past, from a Latter-day Saint standpoint, concern the period between 1820 and 1844.

Given the consciously intended and carefully worked out reformation of the Reorganization’s understanding of the restoration, new interpretations of Joseph Smith and his prophetic claims, as well as the Book of Mormon, have been necessary. The function of these explanations is to justify and

world unchecked” (Edwards, “Ethics and Dissent in Mormonism,” in *Let Contention Cease*, 254). But “if the prescriptive view of Mormonism is correct then I am a spokesman—not for myself nor some contingency . . . , but for the movement itself—for the prescriptive truths of two centuries. If not, I am unlawfully accepting the authority and the community it grants me” (ibid., 255).

\(^{33}\) Richard P. Howard, RLDS Church Historian, and one of the more significant figures in the remodeling of his church, has made his mark with a column entitled “Since Yesterday” in the *Saints Herald* that began in 1969 and that appeared almost monthly for the next sixteen years. And when this column did not appear, it often was because he had an essay or a series of essays on some historical topic coming out in the *Saints Herald*.


bolster the ideology of the faction currently in control of the Reorganization. Even saying this much—which should be obvious to those with a smattering of information about recent RLDS controversies—risks giving offense to those who see the religious world more or less through the lens provided by the now-dominant RLDS faction. Those with either secular or religious convictions tend to be irritated or even outraged—sometimes justifiably—when accounts are offered of what is going on in their communities that do not correspond to their sense of reality or conform to their perspective of the restoration. While I am obviously not supportive of the ideology or the power politics of the faction that currently has the upper hand among the RLDS, I do not wish to offend delicate sensivities.

I write from the perspective of one situated in a different and, as it turns out, increasingly less related "faith-community," to use the expression the RLDS use to describe themselves. Having at least some bias on these matters seems quite unavoidable. Nor is it necessarily desirable, as some journalists and historians still pretend, to strive to avoid all biases. Be that as it may, every account will necessarily involve some bias, even or especially one provided by the RLDS leadership, including components in the RLDS bureaucracy. What is most intriguing is to identify and describe these RLDS biases and then compare and contrast them with those at work among Latter-day Saints.

Reforming the Community of Faith and Memory

Previously I described many of the published views of RLDS authors on the Book of Mormon.36 None of these writers, with one possible exception,37 allows for the possibility that

36 In "More Revisionist Legerdemain and the Book of Mormon," I examined the published statements of A. Bruce Lindgren, who since we last looked in on him has been promoted to World Church Secretary (to the RLDS First Presidency) from his old position in the RLDS Temple School Division, which is, among other things, the RLDS ministerial training operation—it is now housed in their new Temple in Independence, Missouri; Bill Russell, political science and history teacher at the RLDS Graceland College in Lamoni, Iowa; Wayne Ham, currently director of the new RLDS Temple; Paul M. Edwards, currently director of the Temple School. I also described the opinions of James E. Lancaster and Leland Neggaard. See Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 3 (1991): 261–65, 267–81.

37 That is, James E. Lancaster, whose views on the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon are not clearly discernable from the one essay he has written that deals in some way with that book.
the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text. But these agnostic views on the Book of Mormon are not representative of the understanding of at least a minority of primitive believers among the RLDS. Revisionist explanations have been promulgated by RLDS leaders since the sixties. For example, Richard P. Howard, RLDS Church Historian and prominent spokesman for the ideology now being advanced by both the RLDS bureaucracy and hierarchy, has much to say about what it is that historians are doing when they tell their stories. Historians, he claims, "see the events and those who made them only through the mists of fragmented and often conflicting records. Then they must interpret those records. Interpretation always occurs in a preconceived framework of meaning and purpose." Another way of making this point is that what historians bring to the task—their preunderstandings, assumptions, beliefs, preferences and biases—will at least color and perhaps even determine what they claim to find or discover in the past. Hence, if one begins with the assumption, which Howard clearly does, that the Book of Mormon is not an authentic ancient text, then not only will the understanding of that text be radically altered, but so will virtually everything logically linked to that understanding. Hence, if there was no real Lehi colony, then it follows that there were no real plates that Joseph Smith had that were witnessed by others, nor were there any real encounters with angelic figures from the past. Howard obviously sees exactly where his revisionist history is leading, though he is careful not to state his views too bluntly, lest the less than converted among those remaining in the liberalized RLDS flock be unnecessarily agitated. And he is nothing if not tentative when dealing with complicated issues. "The interpretations," he claims, "must of necessity be tentative, open to correction. There must be willingness to discard one interpretation for another based on more reliable historical evidence and method."

Given the realities of attempting to tell a story on the basis of whatever happens to have been recorded and preserved, and with our limited capacities to draw from such texts a plausible account of past events, tentativeness is indeed a virtue among

38 For Richard P. Howard's views on the so-called "dissidents," that is, those resisting the liberal takeover, see his The Reorganization Comes of Age, 409–32—a chapter entitled "Schismatic Strains Resurface, 1960–1990."

39 Howard, RLDS Beginnings, to 1860, 31.
historians. But after having said that much, it is also the case that our indecisiveness about certain issues may make a profound difference to the life of a community of faith and memory. Hence Howard pleads for openness, but not for an openness to the possibility that real angels visited Joseph Smith, or that there really was a Lehi colony, or virtually any of the traditional contents of the faith of the Saints, either Latter-day Saints or RLDS. Instead, he insists that “faith will take on new meaning and vitality, informed in part by events reinterpreted in this specific framework of historical conception.” Presumably, when looked at his way, “we will see figures of the past as authentic persons with the same joys, fears, hopes, and anxieties as we know in church life today.”

So we are now to “focus on the complexity of Joseph Smith’s multifaceted personality” for clues about the “faith-community” he started. Howard sees the “Saints as a people of paradoxes,” at least partly because “they displayed courage tempered by fear, faith informed by doubt.” We presumably now know from the work beginning with Fawn Brodie’s 1945 account of Joseph Smith that his “rich family heritage was a strength to his own self-image, including his interest in ‘white magic’ and his capacity for religious speculations about subjects of antiquity.” Perhaps such language is Howard’s subtle way of telling his readers what he really thinks went on in the production of the Book of Mormon. But, if that is the case—and there is every reason to believe that it is—it is simply less than fully candid to pretend that something has not been lost for the faith when the Book of Mormon is seen as merely an imaginative, speculative account of the past—frontier fiction—into which bits and pieces of the immediate nineteenth-century environment were worked by Joseph Smith either knowingly or un-

40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 23. Such florid descriptions are typical of Howard’s style, which tends toward the melodramatic. His writings are thus filled with expressions of anguish about his having to raise the hard questions and hence struggle in “these heavy seas” to fashion “a more usable faith” (ibid., 12), which he is at pains to describe as one informed by the rigorous applications of the historical method as he understands such things. But Howard holds out hope: “In quiet, unhurried reflection on our common past, we can find solace, peace of mind, and new hope. We discover a heritage mixed with gladness and despair. That sort of real past,” he assures his readers, “speaks to our own joyful, often sad, faith journey” (ibid., 22).
42 Ibid., 86.
knowingly. One wonders why it would not be more open and honest for those who either can no longer believe the essentials of the founding story, or who never came to believe them in the first place, not to face up to that fact and move on to something a little less bizarre, at least from their secularized perspective.43

Howard describes "the process of Book of Mormon translation."44 He adds: "Suffice it to say that it is as yet unknown precisely how Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon. Theories abound, but neither the actors in the drama nor later scholars have fully explained the translation method."45 Howard insists that understanding what "translation" meant to Joseph Smith "may help to illuminate the difficulty of uncovering the method. When Joseph Smith, Jr., used the word 'translation' in relation to the Book of Mormon, he described a process more commonly known as 'revelation.' "46 So Howard shifts the enigma from what he calls the "process of translation" to the "process of revelation."47 He insists that "a revelatory process, then, was the essence of Book of Mormon translation," and then concludes that what Joseph Smith was doing when he translated the Book of Mormon "bears no relation to a linguistic exercise of conveying ideas to one language from another."48 With this hypothesis in place, Howard is ready to argue, though in subdued tones, that the Book of Mormon is not an authentic ancient text, for nothing was translated—nothing authentically ancient was provided by Joseph Smith. Hence, from Howard's perspective, "Book of Mormon translation implied an imagina­tive, intuitive mind, verbalizing a lengthy and varied text under the subjective impress of inspiration. The result would profoundly relate to its time and place."49 "The resulting text had a profound connection with this time and place. It addressed many concerns of nineteenth-century New York people. These are the important aspects of Book of Mormon history. They spoke to

43 In the "New Mormon History" or "Revisionist History," about which Howard and other RLDS historians are euphoric, there is, he assures his readers, the possibility of what he calls "a more usable faith" (ibid., 12). The other possibility, for Howard, seems to be "believing what was not so" about the past.
44 Ibid., 115.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 118, cf. 119 for similar language.
48 Ibid., 119.
49 Ibid. (emphasis added).
the early Latter Day Saint faith.” In all of this, Howard is clearly not interpreting the text, but explaining it on essentially secular, naturalistic assumptions which are not examined but merely assumed.

Specifically, according to Howard, in imaginatively crafting the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith drew upon such features of his own immediate environment as speculation concerning “the Hebraic origin of some of the ancient peoples of the Western Hemisphere,” or upon interest in “native American burial mounds in New England, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.” That is as far as Howard goes in identifying what he calls “the profound connection” that the Book of Mormon has with its “time and place,” though he grants that “other explanatory materials are easily available,” and hence he finds it necessary in his new account of Mormon things to “only briefly describe the contents of the Book of Mormon,” always with an eye to seeing its relationship with what he considers its nineteenth-century time and place.

Howard lists “some of those cultural, religious, and social aspects” found in Joseph Smith’s immediate environment that were worked into the Book of Mormon, including the following: (1) the chosen land theme, (2) the religious utopian idea, (3) a self-supporting rather than paid clergy, (4), anti-catholicism, (5) the millennium and gathering of the Jews, (6) anti-secret society sentiment, (7) preference for democratic rather than monarchical rule. Howard adds that “other important religious issues, including the faith-works controversy, sectarianism, original sin, and trinitarianism/unitarianism, were themes of both the Book of Mormon and the nineteenth-century social scene in the United States. Yet another Book of Mormon theme, also played out in the larger culture in a cyclic pattern, was an uneasy distrust of wealth” (ibid., 123). Clearly this is no argument for the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Instead, it is a rather typical effort to read the book as nineteenth-century fiction, or to persuade others to understand it that way. It is instructive to see what scholarly support for his reading of the Book of Mormon can be provided by Howard. He cites the essay by Susan Curtis [Mernitz] as an excellent analysis of themes relating to nineteenth-century American culture and the Book of Mormon (ibid., 125 n. 12). See Curtis, “Palmyra Revisited: A Look at Early Nineteenth-Century America and the Book of Mormon,” 30–37; reprinted in Vogel, ed., The Word of God as “Early Nineteenth-Century America and the Book of Mormon,” 81–96.
The Politics of Empowered Revisionism

In his "Editor's Introduction: Questions to Legal Answers," Daniel C. Peterson responded to Bill Russell's letter justifying RLDS revisionist ideology on the grounds that it amounted to a perfectly harmless and entirely necessary and wholesome "rethinking of our traditions." Peterson correctly challenged that sophistry by pointing out the extent to which such "rethinking" involved jettisoning the foundations of the faith. He insisted that what people like Russell, Howard, and others among the RLDS have in mind is more like "redefining" or "replacing." In order to give "some idea of just what 'rethinking' has meant to one specific region of the RLDS church," Peterson quoted extensively from an item that appeared in the press describing events that took place in April 1991 in the RLDS congregation in Orem, Utah. Immediately after Armand Wijckmans, then pastor of the congregation, had held a regional Book of Mormon day, at which at least one Latter-day Saint scholar spoke, Mr. Wijckmans was locked out of his church and eventually "silenced," that is, he had his "priesthood license" removed. The end result was the formation by younger and more aggressive elements of the congregation of what is called an "Independent Restoration Branch," which is entirely separate from the official Reorganized Church.

Peterson was called on the carpet in a letter written by A. Bruce Lindgren (on behalf of the RLDS First Presidency) for having cited the newspaper item. It would appear that the same irritation that led the RLDS First Presidency to silence FRAA by withdrawing permission for them to hold an annual meeting in the Auditorium in Independence also had something to do with the "silencing" of Pastor Wijckmans in Orem, although what took place in Orem preceded the publication of the condemnation of FRAA by the RLDS First Presidency by a month. One certainly can understand why the RLDS hierarchy and bureaucracy does not want their new understandings of the Book of Mormon and related matters to become a topic of public discussion or controversy. However, I am in no way bound by their under-

54 Ibid., lvii–lxix.
standing of their institutional imperatives, even though I appreciate the importance of comity in dealing with sensitive matters. On the other hand, Lindgren (on behalf of the RLDS First Presidency) has one justifiable complaint. It is a mistake to assume on the basis of what was quoted by Peterson about what took place in the Orem congregation that the RLDS have some official policy of silencing those who may still believe in the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon and who therefore still preach from that text on the assumption that it is the word of God made available to us by the power of God. Neither believing in or using the Book of Mormon appears to be grounds for silencing. But holding a regional Book of Mormon day at which Latter-day Saint scholars are invited to defend the Book of Mormon may, if I understand the official statement of the RLDS First Presidency, constitute actionable insubordination.

Some of the statements Lindgren included in his letter are clearly true. For example, as we have seen, "members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints," according to Lindgren, "hold varying views on the Book of Mormon. The church continues to use and honor the book as scripture." But they are clearly involved in "rethinking" exactly what they mean by "scripture" precisely because they have also been "rethinking" what constitutes divine special "revelations" such as those that stand at the very core of the faith.

Crushing FRAA

But there are still some RLDS and former RLDS—those involved in FRAA, for example—who are struggling to resist

56 Letter from A. Bruce Lindgren to Stephen D. Ricks, 9 September 1992.
57 Several people associated with F.A.R.M.S. made an effort to determine whether the news item was accurate, and also to determine, as far as it was possible, what might have actually led to the silencing of Mr. Wijckmans. And while not all of the relevant details can or ought to be discussed in public—a position that Lindgren also stresses in his letter—it can be said that what was reported in the newspaper is essentially what Mr. Wijckmans believes to have taken place. In addition, it must be stressed that the silencing of Mr. Wijckmans followed immediately on his having held a regional Book of Mormon day at which at least one Latter-day Saint delivered a lecture supporting the Book of Mormon. And, as we will see, such activity seems to irritate the RLDS First Presidency, or those acting under their supervision.
the fashionably revisionist account of the Book of Mormon, which reduces it to “inspired” or merely potentially “inspiring” fiction with some more or less acceptable religious content. For years FRAA was permitted to hold an annual meeting on the Book of Mormon at the RLDS headquarters, then in the Auditorium in Independence, Missouri. On some occasions FRAA invited Latter-day Saint scholars to give addresses on the Book of Mormon.  

Apparently by May 1991 FRAA had simply gone too far and at that time the RLDS First Presidency took steps to put FRAA out of business or at least to restrict its impact on RLDS members as much as possible. Hence, in the May 1991 issue of the Saints Herald, the mass circulation magazine under the direct editorial control of the RLDS First Presidency, there appeared an official statement by them on FRAA. “Requests for information have come to the First Presidency,” they report, “from field leaders about recent activities of the Foundation for Research on Ancient America [FRAA]. Some confusion has developed regarding the foundation’s intentions and its relationship to the church.” The RLDS First Presidency expressed concern that among the membership of FRAA were those “who are former priesthood and members of the [RLDS] church. If it desires to stand separate but ancillary to the church, it currently is functioning in violation of several church policies: solicitation of funds across jurisdictional boundaries; conducting regional activities without proper authorization from field leadership, sometimes in competition with local church programming, and sometimes sponsored by ‘Restoration branches’; publishing materials targeted for church member usage that have not received the editorial review of the First Presidency; and publish-

58 John W. Welch, Donald W. Parry, Hugh Nibley, and perhaps other Latter-day Saint scholars have addressed the annual meetings of FRAA in Independence, Missouri, on issues relating to the Book of Mormon.

59 See “Foundation for Research On Ancient America,” Saints Herald 138/5 (1991): 182. This item is signed “The First Presidency.” They explain that FRAA was begun “in 1966 without church sponsorship. It has not been and is not now officially associated with the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.” They also explain that FRAA is not “a continuation of the former Archaeological Research Society, sponsored by the World Church from 1944 until 1978.” They then suggest that “the confusion also may be partly a result of FRAA’s attempt to take a neutral stand among the various entities [like the Latter-day Saints?] that have a belief in the Book of Mormon.”
ing materials that compete with church publications in both sales and theological content."\textsuperscript{60}

The RLDS First Presidency also accused FRAA of "extending its scope of activity beyond the original ongoing research [on the Book of Mormon] and annual assemblies to include more frequent gatherings and publications," thereby compounding confusion among the RLDS who want to understand the Book of Mormon. Hence, according to the RLDS First Presidency, "some have assumed that FRAA is a valid source for understanding the church's doctrine regarding the Book of Mormon and related issues."\textsuperscript{61} They then emphatically declined to "turn over to a separate organization the task of representing the church's position on matters of faith and doctrine." And because there is "increasing confusion as to whether FRAA is qualified or authorized to teach what the church believes about the Book of Mormon, and because the privilege of using the Auditorium for conferences on the Book of Mormon carries with it an implied authorization from us, the First Presidency has decided to withdraw that privilege."\textsuperscript{62} They closed their statement on FRAA by affirming that they encourage the RLDS "to pursue their study of the Book of Mormon and all related subjects by using the resources provided by the church through Herald House and Temple School. Such materials currently represent the best understandings and most appropriate interpretations of the book itself, how it was revealed, its place in our history, and how it serves the church today as one of the three standard books of scripture."\textsuperscript{63} This appears to be a nice way of asserting that if one wants to get clear on the current "official" RLDS stance on the Book of Mormon, one must turn to accounts like that provided by Richard P. Howard, or to actions by the RLDS First Presidency. But the story does not end with this effort to quash FRAA. Just over a year later, a member of the RLDS First Presidency set forth in the pages of the Saints Herald the current thinking of the RLDS hierarchy on the Book of Mormon.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid. "Because of the content and faith position of their materials on the Book of Mormon, we feel," wrote the RLDS First Presidency, "we have a responsibility to the church to say that there is reason for questioning the scholarship of some of the materials published and distributed by FRAA."
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
“Growing up as a People,” While Giving up on the Book of Mormon

Alan Tyree, a member of the RLDS First Presidency until his recent replacement by W. Grant McMurray, published an essay in the *Saints Herald* in June 1992, in which he asked the following questions concerning the Book of Mormon: “What should be our stance regarding the Book of Mormon in evangelism? Can we use it in evangelism when it often causes others to look at us in suspicion, attributing to us all the negative aspects of Mormonism, including racism?”64 “What do we tell non-member inquirers about it? How do we answer the critics who say we are racist because, like the Mormon church in Utah, we also believe the Book of Mormon? In nations where government authorities urge us not to use the corporate name of the church because it will cause people to misunderstand who we are and what we stand for, can we use a book of scripture which causes such confusion?”65

Tyree’s answer to these questions is that, “with regard to the Book of Mormon, we have been growing up as a people, learning more about church history, learning more about ancient American archaeology and anthropology and cultural history, learning more about the internal qualities of the book as a piece of religious literature.”66 This new maturity has produced, according to Tyree, three types of people in the Reorganization. “The first type have never doubted or questioned the difference between God as God really is, and God as they perceive God to be.” These people are like children or childlike adults. The second group, and clearly those whom Tyree sees as genuinely mature RLDS, “treat their present understanding of God as symbolic of what God really is—and therefore as temporary and tentative.”67 The third group may suspect that what they believe is flawed, “but they are afraid to face the possibility of losing

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65 Ibid., 13. I admit to being simply baffled by the bizarre charge that Latter-day Saints are racist because we believe the Book of Mormon. It is common to find critical statements about what the RLDS tend to call the “Utah Mormon Church” in the pages of the *Saints Herald*. Tyree’s essay is typical in that he is concerned to find ways of distinguishing the RLDS from the Latter-day Saints.
66 Ibid., 11 (emphasis added).
67 Ibid., 12.
their faith if they should discover that their knowledge of God is not perfect." Such people are "unfaithful," according to Tyree, because they prefer their own "dogma to additional light and truth from God."68 Tyree insists that, "if the Book of Mormon is to have some claim on humans it must be reasonable to them. . . . Our concepts regarding the Book of Mormon and its origins must at least be compatible with reason."69

What might a "rational" account of the Book of Mormon look like? Tyree considers an answer "compatible with reason" to the question of where the Book of Mormon came from to be crucial to a mature faith. He lists a number of possible explanations of its origins, including the notion of what he calls "plenary revelation," that is, that Joseph Smith gained access to the English for the book "through a miraculous means," or that it was simply "given by divine power." That view would seem to entail that the book is an authentic ancient text. A second possible explanation "is that the revelation came by a fully conceptual means" and hence Joseph Smith was given access to "the meaning of an unknown language." This account also seems to entail the historical authenticity of the book. A third possibility is that the Book of Mormon was produced "by human authorship. This supposes that Joseph Smith was gifted and could have written the work himself." When understood as Joseph Smith’s "original composition, it could have been the product of his own mind and of the times in which speculation concerning the origins and history of ancient Americans was popular." Such an account, richly illustrated in Richard P. Howard’s recent work, as we have seen, either explicitly or implicitly dispenses with the notion that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text. A fourth explanation is that Joseph Smith can be seen "as a clairvoyant." Such a vague explanation might be compatible with any of the other accounts, depending upon what exactly is meant by "clairvoyant." Finally, some combination of these explanations or other accounts might be possible, though Tyree does not attempt to explain how such explanations could be synthesized or harmonized.

Where does Tyree feel that the RLDS should stand on the question of the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon? What he claims as certain is that "the historicity of the book cannot be proven," but also that many of its teachings "are not

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68 That is, to the latest scholarly fashions.
found in the New Testament but in the development of medieval theology.” The conclusion that he draws from these assertions is that the Book of Mormon must be received as scripture “in the same way we receive the Bible.” But the reader is left to guess about what that might entail. Be that as it may, according to Tyree, “we know that Joseph Smith, while uneducated according to our standards, was better educated than his peers and was gifted in intellect and linguistic ability.” And “from reputable Mormon archaeologists...we have learned that there is no archaeological support for the Book of Mormon.” “The style of writing, biblical quotations, concepts, and anachronisms are consistent with a nineteenth century hypothesis of authorship.” “The concepts of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ

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70 Tyree quotes and paraphrases a paper read by the RLDS First Presidency in a meeting at the Auditorium in Independence, Missouri, on 9–12 January 1979 when they presented to the salaried appointees and executive staff members of the Reorganized Church what they called the “Faith to Grow” program. The papers presented at that time have come to be known as the “Presidential Papers” and have been circulated by concerned dissident RLDS as an indication of apostasy among RLDS leadership. For the statements on the Book of Mormon, see Presidential Papers (Independence, MO: Cumorah Books, 1979), 28–31 (from material read at First Presidency Meetings, 9 January 1979, 1:45 P.M.). Tyree quotes extensively from this document, but without a full citation.


72 As far as I know there are no RLDS professional archaeologists. Tyree may have in mind Latter-day Saint archaeologists, but he mentions no names, and hence it is not clear whom he has in mind. His stance on this matter is essentially that of the anti-Mormon propaganda put out by the Gospel Truths Ministries operating out of Grand Rapids, Michigan. For example, see Luke P. Wilson, “The Scientific Search for Nephite Remains,” Heart and Mind: The Newsletter of the Gospel Truths Ministries (Fall 1992): 2–3, 5. Wilson has a section of his essay entitled “An LDS Archaeologist’s Conclusion,” which draws upon an unpublished paper read on 25 August 1984 at a Sunstone Theological Conference in Salt Lake City by Raymond T. Matheny, who is described as a “former Brigham Young University anthropology professor” (ibid., 3). The word “former” is gratuitous, since Matheny still teaches at BYU. Wilson’s essay is augmented by Joel Groat’s “Bones, Stones and the Scriptures: Has Archaeology Helped or Hurt the Bible?” Heart and Mind (Fall 1992): 1, 4–5. For a complete response to these essays, see William J. Hamblin, “Basic Methodological Problems with the Anti-Mormon Approach to the Geography and Archaeology of the Book of Mormon,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 2/1 (1993): 161–97.

73 Tyree, “Christian Witness of the Book of Mormon.”
expounded in the Book of Mormon are also rooted in nineteenth-century understandings. It is capable of being identified as a nineteenth-century scripture because it deals with questions and concepts of the period and place of its coming forth. Without equivocation, it may be affirmed as scripture. But its relationship to prenineteenth-century history (specifically ancient American history) is so far not established by any authority external to itself."\(^{74}\)

After pushing the hypothesis that the Book of Mormon is nineteenth-century fiction, Tyree claims that the RLDS should "decide for themselves what they will do with the Book of Mormon. Millions have chosen to call it 'scripture.' " Tyree insists that the RLDS "let it speak for itself. If it is useful to people, they will make that decision for themselves. But let us not make that decision for them, by making it a test of faith and fellowship that they must believe in the book."\(^{75}\) This opinion is fully consistent with that expressed in 1976 by Peter Judd and A. Bruce Lindgren: "from the early years of the [RLDS] church up to the present day there have been a number of different ways in which Latter Day Saints view the Book of Mormon." In 1976, Judd and Lindgren recommended that individual RLDS "form their own opinion of its value."\(^{76}\)

Why should it be accepted as scripture, if it is not what it claims to be, the authentic record of an ancient people with whom God had dealings? From Tyree's perspective it seems that "it is scripture because of its acceptance and use by people, millions of them, who testify that it functions in their lives as scripture." But to make that point he has to include Latter-day Saints who emphatically understand the book to be an authentic ancient text and not a nineteenth-century work of fiction in which the imaginatively gifted Joseph Smith sought to address his own religious concerns, as well as those of his rustic neighbors. To say that it is scripture because it is believed to be scripture obviously does not answer the question of why it should be believed to be scripture. There is something circular in that kind of reasoning. In January 1991 a seminar of what the RLDS call their Joint Council (consisting of the First Presidency, Twelve, and Presiding Bishop) was held on the

\(^{74}\) Ibid.
\(^{75}\) Ibid., 24.
scriptures and that group reached what Tyree calls "a high degree of consensus regarding the Book of Mormon," including the following: (1) it is scripture, (2) it is important to RLDS history as "an example of the prophetic ministry of Joseph Smith, Jr.," (3) there are many questions about the Book of Mormon for which "we do not have final answers," (4) each person can determine the "personal value of all or parts of the book in their own lives," and (5) the RLDS leadership "acknowledge some practical limitations of parts of the book," but also find passages in it "which we consider divine, eternal and universal."

Silencing Criticisms; Reaching Accommodations; Acquiring Respectability

The Book of Mormon continues to be ridiculed in the popular press, attacked by anti-Mormon propagandists, and criticized by secularized intellectuals and cultural Mormons for whom it is far too closely related to what the redoubtable John Stuart Mill mocked as a modern form of madness—"an alleged new revelation . . . in the age of newspapers, railways, and the electric telegraph." For example, George D. Smith, the owner of Signature Books, known for his criticism of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, claims that what he calls New Mormon History has ignited controversy: "Within the LDS community, traditional narratives of the supernatural have usually been taught as factual events. Beginning in the 1950s, however, professional Mormon historians . . . began to present a more inclusive past. Historical inquiry has reexamined traditional accounts in the context of contemporary American cul-

77 Tyree, "Christian Witness of the Book of Mormon," 24. No indication is given of how to sort out what is true from what is false in the Book of Mormon by Alan Tyree.
ture." Smith then denigrates those he labels "traditional Mormon historians" because they "typically reject compromises, such as the view that a mythical Book of Mormon can evince religious authenticity as 'inspired redaction.' Everything in the Book of Mormon, they say, must be accepted as historical fact." Thus it turns out that something like what is happening to the Book of Mormon among the RLDS is also being recommended by cultural Mormons. But unlike the situation within the Reorganization—where there has not been an opportunity for an effective defense of a genuinely believing account of the past at least partly because both the bureaucracy and hierarchy have been in thrall to revisionist ideologies—Latter-day Saint intellectuals who accept the essential elements of the traditional account have been able to respond to the revisionist challenge, though not without an ongoing struggle, as we shall see.

I will provide, in addition to the example of George D. Smith and his associates, two other examples: First, in 1984, Ernest H. Taves, an anti-Mormon publicist, opined as follows: "Theologians and scholars of other denominations and religions do not attend seriously to the Book of Mormon. One branch of the Mormon Church, the Reorganized Church, with headquarters in Missouri, repudiates the Book of Abraham, which remains a sacred canon in the Utah church." Since, according to

80 George D. Smith, "Editor’s Introduction," Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), viii.
81 Ibid., ix.
83 For an outstanding example, see Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed., New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993). The copyright for this book is owned by "Smith Research Associates," even though other books published by Signature Books indicate that the press owns the copyright. Does this indicate that some or all of the ten authors whose essays appear in this book have been employed by George D. Smith?
Taves, what Latter-day Saints want above everything else “is widespread acceptance by the mainstream religious community,” holding onto the Book of Mormon and book of Abraham keeps them “alien and apart.” Moreover, the Book of Mormon also presumably creates serious and painful problems for those Taves quaintly labels “Mormon intellectuals.” “Consider the plight of young [now somewhat older] Mormon historians examining the early history of their church. To the extent that they carry on their research with the objectivity expected as a matter of course in historical research generally, and to the extent that their published work reflects that objectivity, they will incur the condemnation of high church authority.” In language that sounds like it could have been lifted from Lavina Fielding Anderson’s recent outburst in Dialogue or from one of D. Michael Quinn’s tirades against the Brethren and Brigham Young University, Taves claims that “intellectual life within the church seems now to be getting worse, not better.”

Taves holds that an insistence that “the church stands or falls on the authenticity of the Book of Mormon” is exactly what “will continue to prevent mainstream scholars from granting Mormonism the kind of consideration readily granted to other religions.” In a show of concern for the welfare of the Saints, Taves holds that “an obvious solution presents itself, at least to the non-Mormon: Accept the prosaic origin of the Book of Mormon, leave behind the shady beginnings of the church, join the rest of the world, and go ahead with what you’ve got.”

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85 Ibid.
86 Ibid., 262. Of course, D. Michael Quinn is then identified by Taves as a hero—the “one Mormon historian [who] has taken a clear stand against his ecclesiastical superiors.” Quinn has made a minor career out of courting such accolades from those on the fringes of the Church.
88 Taves, Trouble Enough, 263.
89 Ibid. According to Taves, “it may come as a surprise to many Mormons and non-Mormons alike that many church members who would like to think of themselves as ‘good’ Mormons do not believe in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.” His only example is Sterling M. McMurrin, who has made it clear that “he had never believed in the Book of Mormon,” and has announced, as justification for his disbelief, the dogma
“Here it should be noted,” according to Taves, “that the position of the Reorganized Church with respect to these problems is considerably more liberal than that of the Utah church, as may be seen in the work of William D. Russell. Russell set forth the view that the believing Mormon can accept the fact that Joseph wrote the Book of Mormon, ‘and can still hold that the book has a legitimate place in the canon of scripture for Latter Day Saints.’” Taves thus opens the prospect for the Saints of respectability among gentiles. But the accommodation he proposes is for the Saints to join those mocking gentiles in the great and spacious building. And he is also solicitous for ostensibly beleaguered Latter-day Saint intellectuals who are presumably being thwarted by the Brethren.

Second, in 1982, in what may have been the most extensive single journalistic treatment of the Church, John Farrell reported that “during the Arrington years, the [unidentified Mormon] historians tried to gently nudge the church away from its insistence on literal interpretation” of the Book of Mormon. “Liberal Latter-day Saints,” Farrell reports having been told, “would find it easier to stick with their church if only it would treat The Book of Mormon as an allegorical story that teaches righteous behavior but isn’t necessarily historic truth—the way the Christian churches treat” the Bible. This is exactly the subtle shift currently being made by the RLDS liberal establishment. Farrell also indicated that he had been told by certain unidentified Mormon intellectuals that “it would be easier if the church were willing to treat . . . the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham as parables, but the hierarchy won’t back down.”

From my perspective, that is indeed good news. As bizarre as some of Farrell’s opinions might appear to be, they do not seem to have been sheer journalistic inventions. Hence, one of the more striking recent developments among some Latter-day Saint intellectuals is the emergence of writers who argue against the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon, while opining...

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“that you don’t get books from angels and translate them by miracles; it is just that simple.” See “An Interview with Sterling McMurrin,” Dialogue 17/1 (1984): 25.
90 Ibid., 264.
that it can still be inspired or inspiring when understood as Joseph Smith's historical fiction. 92

Unfortunately, a few so-called Mormon "intellectuals" have played into the hands of those who do not have the interests of the Kingdom in mind, at least from my perspective. Hence, for me, one annoying and depressing feature found on the margins of Mormon culture is the tendency of a few dissidents to fight their battles in the press, while picturing themselves as heroic figures advancing the cause of truth against a repressive Church. It is, of course, easy to find an audience for lurid stories of repression and injustice when The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the target, as the remarks by Ernest Taves seem to illustrate. Dissidents complain that they are being restricted, persecuted, and punished by institutions over which they have no control and that are insensitive to their feelings. 93 They tend to picture themselves as faultless heroes and helpless victims, while they hold the Church hostage by threatening public relations scandals if their demands are not met or if their ideology is not declared normative.

For example, Lavina Fielding Anderson recently opined that the "past two decades have seen accelerating tensions in the relationship between the institutional church" and those she labels "intellectuals and feminists," which she describes as "overlapping subcommunities." 94 By "intellectual" she clearly has in mind a certain, though not representative, sample of more or less well-educated Latter-day Saints, that is, a small group of deracinated people on the fringes of the Mormon community. She admits to approaching what she considers the degenerating


93 This tendency has recently been exacerbated by a few radical feminists, if that is the appropriate label, who argue that they are victims of an oppression that is not merely endemic to Mormon culture but is present everywhere. Hence, it is not surprising that such "arguments" are reduced to statements about how deeply they "feel" about matters, how much they "hurt," and about the "pain" they experience. Apparently to stake a claim to pain is a way to win in this game. This bromide, when generalized, rests on the assumption that institutions necessarily oppress. The only appropriate corrective is presumably to grant the alleged victim authority and power—that and only that will right all wrongs.

relationship between a few revisionist intellectuals and some radical feminists who fear Church leaders “as a woman interested in relationships. I am,” she concedes, “less interested in the various positions defended and attacked about, say, the New Mormon History, than I am about how such attacks and defenses are conducted, what they do to our community, and the human costs in pain, mistrust, and violations of agency. The relationship between Mormon intellectuals and feminists and their church is a troubled and painful relationship.”95 But in place of careful analysis, clarification of issues, and competent history, what we are given is a fifty-page “chronology” presented in that way “partly because the basic facts of ‘what happened’ need to be determined before a responsible analysis can be made and partly because I believe it shows patterns over time that are both hopeful and ominous.”96 Clearly, since she has not given sufficient attention to the intellectual content of the controversies she mentions, she does not sense the way her own bias has colored if not constituted what she sees as the facts about what she claims to see taking place. Anderson’s gossipy litany of presumed abuses by the Brethren of what someone in the same recent issue of Dialogue called “intellectual free agency”97 rests on assumptions that are not self-evident, nor are they clearly set forth and defended with arguments.

Presumably one of the many troublesome indications of the growing repression of intellectuals by the Brethren—that is the controlling theme of Anderson’s chronology—was the following: “30 September 1981. Louis C. Midgley of BYU’s political science department attacks the New Mormon History and historians for a lack of faith. Joined periodically by David Earle Bohn and Gary Novak, he continues his vigorous critique of ‘objective’ history to the present.”98 Unfortunately, for Anderson’s point, I did not use the expression New Mormon History in that paper and I came to know of such a label only later. Furthermore, I have always been puzzled about what, if

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95 Ibid., 8.

96 Ibid.


anything, this label was supposed to identify.99 Suppose, just for the sake of argument, that a case could be made that I had in fact attacked something called New Mormon History on October 15, 1981, at the Western History Association meetings in San Antonio, Texas.100 How would my having done such a thing, or having been joined later by Bohn and Novak, constitute a basic fact about what “really happened” in the supposed “clash between obedience to ecclesiastical authority and the integrity of individual conscience”? More directly, how could my having read and circulated a paper constitute trust-destroying, hurtful repression of dissident intellectuals by the Brethren or by the Church? If by merely setting forth an argument and expressing my opinion, I am speaking for the Church and thereby inflicting pain or violating the freedom of others to express their opinions, I have truly misunderstood my role and greatly underestimated my authority and power.

For Anderson, it seems, intellectual issues are not really important to “Mormon intellectuals.” I find this ironic and even distressing. Instead, what really counts for her is the feelings of people who picture themselves as victims. One wonders where she was when Dialogue published an essay containing patently false charges couched in abusive language, and directed at Bohn, Novak, Neal Kramer, and me,101 merely because we had the audacity to question the soundness of some recent Mormon

99 See the extensive discussion of the confusion over the label New Mormon History in my “The Acids of Modernity and the Crisis in Mormon Historiography,” in Smith, ed., Faithful History, 189–92, 216–19. An attentive reader will note that nothing in that discussion constitutes an attack on anything or anyone but it is merely an attempt to get clear on how the label New Mormon History has been used and what it might mean to those who enjoy using it.

100 September 30, 1981, was the date of the draft of the paper that I read, which I called “The Question of Faith and History,” but which D. Michael Quinn, who arranged the session, unfortunately chose to call “A Critique of Mormon Historians.” I did not attack anyone for “lack of faith.” Instead, I cited only two examples of authors whose essays contained what I considered confusion over historical method to illustrate my argument about the relationships of history to the grounds and content of faith.

history or raise some questions that certainly needed to be raised. I wonder, does it not matter to her that something impor­
tant, even crucial, is at stake when authors invoke naturalistic
declarations that rule out the possibility that the gospel of Jesus
Christ was restored through Joseph Smith or that the Book of
Mormon is true. Instead of emoting about the pain caused by al­
leged insensitivity of the Brethren, it would have been useful for
her to get clear, for example, on exactly what is at stake in the
recent discussion of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.
And, as an intellectual, she should have insisted that the conver­
sation continue, letting the chips fall where they may. Certainly
the much-needed conversation should not be prevented from
taking place for either personal or intellectual reasons.

If there has really been censorship or repression or efforts
to invoke censorship, if there has been a wanton disregard for
proper comity in intellectual discussions, responsibility for such
behavior can be found among people who consider themselves
heroic liberals and who are proud to picture themselves as unfor­
tunate victims of authoritarian control. For example, those who
have been in control of Dialogue have been in a position to de­
termine who could publish what in that magazine. But
Anderson’s emotionally charged “chronology” does not mention
any of that sort of thing, nor does she call attention to efforts by
so-called liberals to censor the discussion that otherwise might
have taken place in Dialogue and in other venues. Nor does she
indicate that for at least a decade she herself has influenced what
could or could not be discussed on certain crucial issues through
her close links to those in control of Dialogue.102

Of course, that is not to say that Dialogue has been merely
a kind of puerile monologue where fashionable slogans and
ideology dominated and solid scholarship was entirely wanting,
but it has at times tended in that direction and, unfortunately—if
we can judge from its most recent issues—it may be moving
more in that direction in the future. Those who love the
Kingdom will look elsewhere for learning and light. And in so
doing they will not allow dissidents on the fringes of the Latter­
day Saint community to push them in the direction that the
RLDS have taken on the Book of Mormon. One way to prevent
such a slide is to encourage a free and open discussion.

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102 For brief comments on one such egregious instance of censor­
ship and then attempted censorship, see Novak’s review of Faithful History,
239–40.
Fortunately there are a few genuinely “alternative voices” to the party line peddled by Signature Books\(^{103}\) and in *Dialogue* and other kindred spirit publications. One can now find presses ready to publish competent explications and defenses of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims, something that cultural Mormons bent on going down the same path taken since the sixties by the RLDS have resisted with both passion and political cunning for more than a decade. In the Latter-day Saint community, unlike the Reorganization, it seems that this discussion cannot be prevented from taking place, and that is a good thing both for the intellectual climate in which we find ourselves and for the building of the Kingdom.

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\(^{103}\) The publication by Signature Books of a collection of essays entitled *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* provides radically revisionist views on the Book of Mormon and hence also on Joseph Smith’s prophetic charisms. But there is nothing new in this book, except perhaps the details, and some of these have appeared previously in *Dialogue* and *Sunstone* (or in *Trinity Journal*—a Protestant evangelical publication). What are whimsically described as “New Approaches” turn out to be either (1) efforts, for example, by Brent Lee Metcalfe, Dan Vogel, Stan Larson, and Edward H. Ashment, to market sophisticated versions of the anti-Mormon argument that the Book of Mormon is fraudulent because it is nineteenth-century fiction, or (2) the endeavor by Tony Hutchinson and David P. Wright to claim that, even though the Book of Mormon, from their perspective, is nineteenth-century fiction (and hence not in any way an authentic ancient text), it still might be “interesting and religiously relevant” or “religiously relevant and significant” (Wright’s language in *New Approaches*, 166, 211), but not a divine special revelation as is understood in the Book of Mormon itself or by Latter-day Saints. The opinion of Hutchinson and Wright is similar to that currently held by those in the Reorganization who crave the accommodation with liberal Protestant scholarship and theology. The recent factional turmoil in the Reorganization is suggestive of what one might expect in the Latter-day Saint community if such a revisionist ideology concerning the Book of Mormon where to become normative or even an acceptable alternative to the traditional faith.