Editor's Introduction: Questions to Legal Answers

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Editor’s Introduction

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Introduction to the items reviewed and main issues discussed in this issue.
Editor’s Introduction

Questions to Legal Answers

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“‘Shut up,’ he explained.”1

The spring of 1992 heard the late afterclap of a minor tempest that swirled about this Review the previous summer. In an eloquent article devoted to the theme of “redemptive truth” and reconciliation, Eugene England called for greater civility and courtesy within the Latter-day Saint community. He also lamented, in passing, “the absurd spectacle of two ‘alternate voices’—the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (F.A.R.M.S.) and Signature Books—engaged in name-calling and threatening lawsuits because . . . one is aggressively proud of its orthodoxy, the other aggressively proud of its independence—and neither [is] very merciful.”2

Absurdity, aggressive pride, lack of mercy—these are grave indictments. Any reflective Christian so accused should give them serious attention. In this “Introduction,” I intend to begin doing that. I have little real choice, of course, since F.A.R.M.S. represents an attempt to create a body of work that is at once genuinely scholarly and authentically Latter-day Saint. Thus, any serious charge that we have failed to measure up either to the canons of scholarship or to the standards of Christianity merits our closest scrutiny. From the very conception of the Review of Books on the Book of Mormon we

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1 Ring Lardner, The Young Immigrants (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1920), 78 (punctuation ours). I am indebted to Professors William J. Hamblin and John W. Welch for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

were well aware of the risk of failure. We were also afraid that even our attempts at honest and forthright appraisal would cause offense. In the first Review, we remarked that

We undertake this enterprise with some concern that our intentions be properly understood. As Latter-day Saints, we belong to a culture which values kindness and the accentuation of the positive. This is quite proper, and entirely Christian. Criticism in the commonly used sense of the term—and the reviewing of books written by fallible mortal authors will always entail a certain amount of such criticism—is something that our culture is wary of, and with some justification. Too often, it can be unhelpful, unfair, cruel, and self-aggrandizing. Of Babylon, and not of Zion.3

Reflection on the issues raised by Professor England will allow us to consider the very nature of this Review, now in its fourth year, as also the character of any review or scholarly disputation involving Latter-day Saints. But other issues will also demand thought. What is “name-calling”? What is “libel” or “slander”? What might constitute “deception” in the world of writing and publishing? What is an “agenda”? Does everybody have one? What, if anything, is signified by the term “anti-Mormon”? Is there a difference between “rethinking” a religious tradition, and “redefining” or even replacing it? What is genuine faith? Which Latter-day Saint beliefs are revealed, authoritative, and essential to real Mormonism? Which, if any, are merely traditional, received, and so neither authoritative nor essential? My essay here does not pretend to lay down final answers to these important questions. But they are well worth consideration. Professor England also indicted us for the rather less abstract sin of “threatening lawsuits.” That question can be disposed of more easily.

Perhaps it is best to begin the process with a brief survey of the genesis and evolution of last summer’s dispute between Signature Books and F.A.R.M.S. Doing so will also allow me to document this minor but interesting episode in the intellectual history of Mormonism in the late twentieth century.

In principio (erat Verbum)

The third volume of the Review of Books on the Book of Mormon featured Richard Lloyd Anderson's response to Rodger I. Anderson's book Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined, as well as essays reviewing Dan Vogel's The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture, written by Louis Midgley and Stephen E. Robinson. All three reviews were negative. The squall began, however, even before the three reviews had issued from the press in late May 1991. My first clue was a telephone call from an old acquaintance at Signature Books. A line from Stephen E. Robinson's forthcoming critique of the Vogel collection had been cited in the May issue of the F.A.R.M.S. Insights newsletter. ("Korihor's back," Professor Robinson was quoted as saying, "and this time he's got a printing press.") My acquaintance professed to be deeply

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6 Richard Anderson's review of Rodger I. Anderson's book contains not the slightest trace of "absurdly aggressive pride" or "lack of mercy," and calls nobody a nasty name by even the remotest stretch of imagination. It is, simply, a lucid, closely reasoned analysis of the evidence relating to Joseph Smith's character. (Even so, it did not escape emotional condemnation from partisans of Signature Books.) The Midgley and Robinson reviews were more polemical, and it is on them that I shall concentrate in this essay.

7 Not long thereafter, we began to see, in print, the claim that F.A.R.M.S. had branded Signature Books "Korihor Press" (Provo Daily Herald, 9 June 1991). This title became temporarily quite popular, and at least one or two people involved with Signature seem to have worn it, for a while, as virtually a badge of honor. Unfortunately, despite the quotation marks in the Herald article, we never actually used the phrase. In later Signature Books responses to the dispute, I noticed that the name "Korihor" and the phrase "Korihor Press" had vanished. Perhaps someone had realized that, while a few intellectually inclined cultural Mormons might find the name "Korihor" delightfully wicked and iconoclastic, it would alienate the overwhelming majority of believing Latter-day Saints.
offended by it. Near the end of the conversation, very briefly, he mentioned the possibility of a lawsuit. I thought he was joking.

Then the Review itself appeared. Almost immediately, a fiery letter from another of the principals at Signature arrived, denouncing the reviewers' "ad hominem attacks." The letter's author condemned "Midgley's inconsiderate, irrelevant personal barbs," decried "his totally inaccurate second-guesses of individual and company motives," and inveighed against "Robinson's flippancy, caustic character assaults," which this Signature official found both "unfair and untrue." The reviews were "shoddy work," in his opinion, and full of "venom." F.A.R.M.S., he submitted, "has evidently lost sight of basic civility and responsibility [sic]." But the author of the letter was also disappointed in me as a person. "I am dismayed," he wrote further, "that as editor, you did not exercise your responsibility to correct your writers' rambling, unfocused, redundant, self-serving invective." Dismissing the entire volume, he went on to say that

It is disturbing that what parades itself under your direction as a collection of thoughtful book reviews is nothing more than a forum for writers intent on promoting their own self-righteousness, dogmatically dictating to others what it means to be Mormon, confusing academic issues with special pleading, and trying to conceal their personal attacks on those who disagree with them behind a facade of pseudo-scholarly window dressing.

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8 The letter is dated 29 May 1991. Its author saw "ad hominem attacks" as particularly characteristic of the Midgley and Robinson reviews, but implicitly recognized them also in Richard Anderson's. Which makes me suspect he could find them in 1 Corinthians 13, as well.

9 He evidently included in this judgment Todd Compton's erudite review of John W. Welch, The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount (RBBM 3 [1991]: 319-22), as well as essays on military practices by David B. Honey and Kurt Weiland that I had found especially valuable (RBBM 3 [1991]: 118-46), and a trio of very cogent responses (by L. Ara Norwood, Matthew Roper, and John A. Tvedtines) to a recent book written by Jerald and Sandra Tanner (RBBM 3 [1991]: 158-230). Even William Hamblin's workmanlike evaluation of the Sorenson-Raish bibliography on pre-Columbian transoceanic voyages (RBBM 3 [1991]:
Apparently oblivious to irony, he declared himself especially upset by the reviewers’ “infantile name-calling.”

We had, it seemed, struck a nerve. And what transpired at the plenary session of the annual conference of the Mormon History Association on the first of June—just days after the publication of the Review—soon removed any doubt. As one participant in the conference recalled it,

The title of the topic to be addressed by Ed Ashment (who almost did not arrive at all) was “The Book of Abraham” (the facsimile of which was featured on the cover of the official MHA program). But alas, it turned out that the major thrust of Ashment’s remarks did not address the Book of Abraham. Indeed, there was confusion, at least in my mind (and in the minds of other MHA conferees), as to the exact nature and subject of Ashment’s remarks!10

I can dispel the confusion. Instead of the Book of Abraham, Ashment, a contributor to Dan Vogel’s collection, addressed the two reviews by Professors Midgley and Robinson (copies of which had been hastily mailed to him by Signature Books), though he did so without identifying them and to a group of people who had not yet seen them. (Small wonder that some in his audience were utterly mystified.) Shadowboxing rather contemptuously with certain “Mormon apologists” whose names and works languished in the obscurity of his footnotes, Ashment asked himself handy questions like “Why do theological apologists have such a difficult time with the principles that underlie historiographic methodology?” 11 He mocked a parade of silly Mormon notions such as

154-57) and Shirley Ricks’s review of Fun for Family Night (RBBM 3 [1991]: 81-83) were, I suppose, simply illustrations (“nothing more”) of our depravity.


11 Edward H. Ashment, “Canon and the Historian,” a paper presented at the 26th annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, 1 June 1991, p. 5. With some changes—the cited question, for instance, has evidently disappeared—this paper is now in print as Edward H. Ashment, “Historiography of the Canon,” in George D. Smith, ed., Faithful History:
non-tarnishing, forever incorruptible, brass plates that anachronistically represent an already-established Old Testament canon as early as 600 BCE; shining stones in ancient semi-submarines; a magic compass that worked only for the righteous; archaeologically unverifiable civilizations, botanically unverifiable plants, paleontologically unverifiable animals, and linguistically unverifiable languages in the pre-Columbian New World; and the existence of an autobiographic papyrus of ancient Abraham in the Utah church’s vault. 12

The Appeal to Caesar

A couple of weeks later, the F.A.R.M.S. office received a letter, dated 14 June 1991, from an attorney retained by Signature Books. In it, he mentioned the Insights newsletter, as well as the three reviews by Professors Anderson, Midgley, and Robinson. “These publications by FARMS,” the lawyer declared, “contain libelous statements about Signature Books, Inc. and the authors of these works. These publications, inter alia, falsely state that Signature Books, Inc. and these authors are ‘dishonest’ and are ‘anti-Mormon’. In FARMS’s next newsletter, please publish a retraction of these publications and statements and an apology to Signature Books, Inc. and the authors.”

Clearly skulking behind this attorney’s polite request was the threat of a lawsuit. We felt then and feel now, however, that no secular court would ever attempt to draw a line between “orthodoxy” and “heresy,” or between “Mormon” and “anti-Mormon,” because, in order to determine what “anti-Mormonism” means, it would first have to decide what “Mormonism” is—what is essential to it, and what, when attacked, would constitute its attacker an “anti-Mormon.” Such theological issues exceed both the authority and the competence of secular courts in a free society. We are confident, as well, that American constitutional law defends the right of scholars

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Essays in Writing Mormon History (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 281-301.

and reviewers to express their opinions freely. "However pernicious an opinion may seem," one judicial ruling has noted, "we depend for its correction not on the conscience of judges and juries but on the competition of other ideas."\textsuperscript{13}

There was, in fact, a powerful question of principle involved that would be worth protecting in court: A vigorous review process is of the essence of free speech in the publishing business. "Libel suits can effectively chill the first amendment rights inherent in critical comments, if the critics are compelled to expend the time and money necessary to defend such suits," observes another legal opinion, which also warns against "the threat that litigation will be used to harass and intimidate innocent critics."\textsuperscript{14} Still, we saw it as unseemly for members of the Church to go to law against one another (1 Corinthians 6:1-7; Matthew 5:25-26). So, in a spirit of conciliation and cooperation and in full settlement of the matter, F.A.R.M.S. published the following statement in the July issue of the Foundation's newsletter \textit{Insights}:

\textbf{Correction or Clarification}


Also, in \textit{Review of Books on the Book of Mormon}, volume 3, statements are made that could be construed as calling unspecified contributors to \textit{The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture} and Signature Books, Inc., “dishonest” and “hard-core anti-Latter-day Saints.” These statements were the

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reviewer’s interpretation of portions of the book, and no personal connotation was intended.

The opinions expressed in the reviews are those of the reviewers alone and do not necessarily represent the position of F.A.R.M.S.\footnote{Similar disclaimers, to the effect that the opinions of the reviewers are theirs alone, and not necessarily those of F.A.R.M.S. or the editor, have appeared in every issue of the \textit{Review of Books on the Book of Mormon} (e.g., 1 [1989]: x; 2 [1990]: xxvi; 3 [1991]: vi).}

Contrary to the impression some might get from Professor England’s article, F.A.R.M.S. never threatened to sue anybody. Somehow, though, this fact failed to reach a number of people. Michael Barrett, for instance, an East Coast partisan of George D. Smith, published a letter in the \textit{Salt Lake Tribune} on 12 August 1991 alluding to “the story [of] Signature Books” and to “the Mormon Church’s problems with free inquiry.” (How was the Church involved in the dispute anyway?)

Mr. Barrett was not alone in his misreading of the situation. Responding in the \textit{Tribune}, on 25 August 1991, to something I had written, a Mr. Larry Burgess of Farmington suggested that I needed “to be apprised of the difference between a dispute in factual presentation and libel.” “If Mr. Peterson honestly believes the ‘Book of Mormon’ has a divine origin,” Burgess continued, “he should stick to the evidence rather than playing the crybaby by accusing Signature Books of some sinister plot to limit his freedom of speech.”\footnote{“Crybaby”? Perhaps \textit{this} is what is meant by “infantile name-calling.”} Apparently, Signature’s legal threats existed only in my paranoid fantasies.\footnote{It is true that I failed to mention evidence for the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon in my letter. (I also neglected to enter into discussion on the relative merits of compact disks and digital audio tapes, to say nothing of the venerable debate over “nature” versus “nurture” in human psychology.) However, I protest Mr. Burgess’s implication that I am unwilling to address the issue of the Book of Mormon’s truthfulness directly. I have done so, in print, more than once. See (1) “The Gadianton Robbers as Guerrilla Warriors,” in Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds., \textit{Warfare in the Book of Mormon} (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 146-73; (2) “Notes on ‘Gadianton Masonry,’” ibid., 174-224; (3) “Editor’s Introduction: By What Measure Shall We Mete?” in \textit{RBBM} 2 (1990): vii-xxvi; (4) review of Peter Bartley, \textit{Mormonism: The Prophet, the Book and the Cult}, in \textit{RBBM} 2 (1990): 31-55; (5) review of Hugh Nibley, \textit{The Prophetic Book of Mormon}, in \textit{RBBM}}
And in a letter published by the *Provo Daily Herald* on 11 September 1991, Bill Russell, a professor of history at RLDS Graceland College, in Lamoni, Iowa, and one of the contributors to Vogel’s *The Word of God*, appealed to the American Constitution and accused the LDS First Presidency and the Twelve of “trying to stifle free inquiry.” This, of course, was not only patently false, but totally irrelevant to any point at issue. What legal authority—the only kind of authority to which the Constitution is relevant—do the Brethren have, or claim to have, to bind our thinking? And, yet again, what on earth did they have to do with the dispute between F.A.R.M.S. and Signature Books? Reduced to syllogistic form, the general argument seems to run as follows:

F.A.R.M.S. published unfavorable reviews.  
Signature Books threatened to sue F.A.R.M.S.  
Therefore, the Church was attempting to suppress free speech.

In subsequent weeks and months, we were repeatedly reminded that F.A.R.M.S. had apologized for its libelous statements, thereby acknowledging its guilt.18 (“F.A.R.M.S. decided to back down,” reported the Tanners.)19 In fact, however, we admitted no guilt. The statement published in the July 1991 issue of *Insights* was entitled “Correction or Clarification.” That title is significant. The entire text of the statement was worked out by F.A.R.M.S.’s volunteer legal counsel in consultation with an attorney retained by Signature Books. The title reflects their compromise. Signature regards the statement as a “correction,” while F.A.R.M.S. sees it as a “clarification.” Readers can judge for themselves whether the

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18 This is implied in George D. Smith’s letter to the *Utah County Journal*, 16 August 1991; the *Provo Daily Herald*, 17 August 1991; and the *Salt Lake Tribune*, 1 September 1991.

statement represents the “retraction” or “apology” initially demanded by Signature’s lawyer.

Areopagitica

On 22 July 1991, an Associated Press article by Vern Anderson appeared in the Salt Lake Tribune. It also appeared in the Ogden Standard Examiner, the Provo Daily Herald, and the Utah County Journal—and, evidently, in other newspapers on both coasts. The article profiled George D. Smith in glowing terms. “To his critics, George D. Smith is a shadowy figure of considerable wealth bent on reshaping Mormonism by digging through its past. To colleagues, he’s a shy man of principle in pursuit of truth. So who is George Smith really? As president of Signature Books, . . . Smith is committed to unfettered historical inquiry.” “I’m willing to shake the tree,” Mr. Smith is quoted as saying, “and perhaps others don’t like to shake the tree because it’s sacred.” “What is relevant,” he declares, “is the marketplace of ideas.” Denying that he is an anti-Mormon, Mr. Smith says “I don’t admit to being anti-anything except anti-anybody that limits the interchange of ideas.” “I’m not trying trying to hide anything,” declares Mr. Smith. “I have no hidden agendas. I stand for historical integrity and free inquiry on all subjects, religious and otherwise.” The article calls Mr. Smith “the scourge of Mormon traditionalists,” who are described as committed, not to “unfettered historical inquiry,” but to “history that bolsters belief and avoids awkward or embarrassing detail.” According to the article, Signature Books was founded in 1981 when the Church decided to cancel publication of a sixteen-volume history of Mormonism and to “muzzle its

20 Provo Daily Herald, 22 July 1991; Utah County Journal, 28 July 1991. I do not have the other publication data at my disposal.

21 In the article, Mr. Smith cites a detail from William Clayton’s journal that concerns the very early practice of plural marriage, and observes that “a ‘faithful’ historian probably wouldn’t include what might be ‘a socially unpopular view of the prophet trying to sell plural marriage to a happily married man. It just looks a bit less than noble.” I discussed this item on separate occasions with five Latter-day Saint scholars, each of whom professed to be as puzzled as I am at Mr. Smith’s suggestion that a “faithful historian” would have suppressed the journal’s mention of the incident. For further information on Mr. Smith’s claim, see the entry for “straw man” in any dictionary of logical fallacies. On his edition of the Clayton journals, see also footnote 126, below.
own historical department.” Mr. Smith and his wife “jumped at the chance to publish some of the rejected work.”

“The Thousand Injuries of Fortunato”

This, I’m afraid, was more than your humble editor could take. I therefore published versions of the following letter in the *Salt Lake Tribune, Provo Daily Herald,* and *Utah County Journal:*

I read Vern Anderson’s article about the owner of Signature Books with great interest and mounting surprise. I am the editor of the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon,* published by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, which has recently aroused the wrath of George D. Smith and his associates. In that capacity, I was both a witness and a target of their attempts at legal intimidation.

This was very instructive. I personally know of no other instance—in my own professional field of Near Eastern studies, or anywhere else, in or out of academia—where lawyers have been deployed against a book reviewer.22

I am astonished, therefore, to see Mr. Smith invoking pieties about “free inquiry” and the “unlimited interchange of ideas.” Some people imagine his publishing company to be a champion of unfettered research and open expression, especially in contrast with the allegedly repressive hierarchy of the LDS Church. Yet when, in this case, views critical of the company and of several of its books appeared, Signature immediately reached for the coercive apparatus of the state in order to suppress those dissenting voices.

As a matter of principle, I refuse to acquiesce in Signature’s effort to dictate the bounds of permissible speech on LDS subjects. I shall therefore repeat as my own personal opinions certain of the views that Signature has sought to censor in those who wrote reviews for me: It is my opinion that several of the

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22 At the time I wrote the letter, this was true. I have since learned of the cases mentioned in this essay—cases which confirm my impression that such episodes are, to use Professor England’s word, absurd.
volumes published by Signature Books—enough to suggest a pattern—have been misleadingly packaged and marketed, and that, in more than one instance, their rhetoric has been disingenuous if not dishonest. Furthermore, Signature Books and George D. Smith seem, to me, to have a clear (if unadmitted) agenda, an agenda that is often hostile to centrally important beliefs of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Although I know that my views are shared by a number of others, I speak here only for myself. I certainly do not speak as a representative of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies. If the people at Signature Books wish to sue me for expressing my views, or in order to prevent me from doing so in the future, they have my address. 23

No suit was filed. Instead, a flurry of letters challenged my point of view in several newspapers along the Wasatch Front. One of the most interesting of these was a letter from George D. Smith himself. On 16 August 1991, it appeared in the Utah County Journal. On the next day, it appeared in the Provo Daily Herald, and, on 1 September, it showed up in the Salt Lake Tribune. The letter made several intriguing claims, which I intend to discuss in their turn, and even alleged an effort by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies to stifle freedom of expression. "In his purported espousal of free inquiry," Mr. Smith wrote, "Peterson failed to mention the attempt by a former FARMS president to have all Signature Books titles banned from the BYU Bookstore. Clearly, by their actions, it is Peterson and FARMS who would distort the truth and corral the marketplace of ideas—not Signature Books."

This, however, is the kind of mythology that flourishes in the absence of open communication, especially when people are eager to believe the worst of those with whom they disagree. 24


24 Representatives of F.A.R.M.S. attempted, even after publication of the "Correction or Clarification," to open up a dialogue with Signature Books, but the attempts proved fruitless. A telephone call was not returned; a written invitation to get together went unanswered.
To set the record straight, I had not mentioned this alleged attempt because (1) it never happened, and therefore (2) I had never heard of it. Within only a few days of Mr. Smith’s letter, though, I began to receive oral reports at second and third hand to the effect that the real reason that had impelled Signature to resort to the law was F.A.R.M.S.’s attempted “restraint of trade.” These were accusations worth looking into. An academic debate over the relative merits and validity of two books had degenerated, seemingly, into accusations based solely on erroneous rumors. What, I wondered, lurked behind them? Little or nothing, it turns out. I now have in my possession a “memorandum” written last year by the “former F.A.R.M.S. president” and signed by the BYU employee in question. The memorandum summarizes the conversation between the two that evidently inspired George D. Smith’s accusation. Nothing in it suggests an attempted “ban” on all Signature titles, much less an effort to “distort the truth and corral the marketplace of ideas.” F.A.R.M.S. welcomes all the good books Signature has published, but wishes to call attention to those that are not good. Nobody at F.A.R.M.S. questions Signature’s right to sell its books in any bookstore willing to carry them.

“Don’t Label Me”

Speaking of the writers anthologized in Dan Vogel’s The Word of God, Mr. Smith’s letter noted that one of our reviewers had labeled them “non-Latter-day Saints, Reorganized Latter-day Saints, disaffected Latter-day Saints, and hard-core anti-Latter-day Saints.” This did not please him. He did not deny that the book featured “non-Latter-day Saints, Reorganized Latter-day Saints, [and] disaffected Latter-day Saints,” but he was disturbed by the fourth category. “It is untrue and grossly unfair to call any of these contributors—especially the devout, practicing Latter-day Saints represented in the book—‘anti-Mormon.’ It was to defend against this libelous accusation that Signature Books consulted an attorney, not to curtail discussion, as Peterson maintains. FARMS subsequently printed a correction in its newsletter.”

Manifestly, George D. Smith does not consider himself—or, at least, does not wish to be known as—an “anti-Mormon.” But if someone considers him to be just that, is it libelous or slanderous to say so? What is “libel” or “slander”?
Some would argue that even "the devout, practicing Latter-day Saints represented in the book"—it is not clear precisely which authors Mr. Smith has in mind—have distinguished themselves for their demonstrated willingness to argue against beliefs held sacred and vital by both the leadership and the general membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But even if the claim that certain writers in The Word of God are anti-Mormons were "untrue and grossly unfair," it would still hardly be libel. On the whole, Americans have the right to hold "untrue and grossly unfair" opinions if they choose to do so. I am no lawyer, but from what I have read such opinions only become libelous if they maliciously affirm a provable falsehood about a specific person. "Use of epithets which are not capable of factual proof or disproof will receive judicial protection. Thus, the coach of the Denver Gold got away with calling a sports agent a 'sleazebag who slimed up from the bayou,' because it was impossible to prove whether someone is a sleazebag or not."25 Likewise, to call someone a "geek" is not libelous because no simple test exists, agreeable to all, to determine the presence or absence of "geekhood" in a given individual.26 And "anti-Mormonism," like "geekhood," is a matter of opinion.27 Furthermore, even if the charge of "anti-Mormonism" could somehow be proven against an individual it would hardly convict him or her of a crime or even, as such, demonstrate immorality.

A relevant case was decided by a United States District Court in New Jersey, in 1982.28 In that instance, the author of a book on gambling, with the book’s publisher, brought a defamation action against the author of a review of the book and against the publisher of the magazine in which the review had appeared. The reviewer’s offense resided in his having said of the book, Casino Gambling for the Winner, that the only thing its readers would learn from it was how to lose. "I consider the publication and

26 I thank Professor James D. Gordon III for this illustration.
27 Which is not necessarily to say that it is fictional, any more than that there are no real "geeks." The literal existence of geeks requires, for most of us, no real demonstration.
sale of this work,” the reviewer declared, “to be the #1 fraud ever perpetrated upon the gambling reader.” Strong language, indeed. Yet the court held that the review was not libelous. Why?

When a book is published, District Judge Sarokin remarked, its author must expect both praise and blame. The court noted that the review neither stated nor implied that the author of the book could be criminally prosecuted for fraud. It also pointed out that all of the statements complained of by the author of the book and its publisher were opinions, and that there was no reason to suppose that these opinions were not honestly held. And where a statement represents someone’s opinion, there is no cause of action for libel. (The issue of whether a statement is an opinion or a claim of fact is one that a court must settle.) Furthermore, the court observed, the opinions were supported in the review article by facts and argument. Opinions can be libelous, the court noted, if their proponent makes a clear but demonstrably false claim of access to private, firsthand knowledge of their truth. But if the author sets out the basis on which his opinions have been formulated, there can be no question of misrepresentation, and the opinions must be accepted as such. A critic, the court declared, has wide latitude to say what he or she wants to say, and critical comments are privileged as long as they do not go beyond the work itself to attack the work’s author personally. But, even here, the critic is free to comment on such elements of the author’s character as are evidenced in the book itself. These principles have recently been affirmed by the United States Supreme Court in Milkovich v. Lorain-Journal Co.29

So much for general considerations. How do the F.A.R.M.S. reviews fare when inspected in the light of legal precedent? The line that sparked the initial controversy was Stephen Robinson’s “Korihor’s back, and this time he’s got a printing press.”30 Surely one must admit that it is, for a Latter-day Saint audience, an arresting passage. But does Professor Robinson’s language represent mere name-calling? As editor of the Review, I judged then that it did not, and I maintain that judgment. Robinson did not seem to me to be offering a gratuitous insult. There was a serious point in his choice of images here, and, in my opinion, he made his reasons entirely

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clear. Korihor, he pointed out, "insisted that 'no man can know of anything which is to come,' that 'ye cannot know of things which ye do not see,' and that faithful Nephites 'were in bondage' to 'the foolish traditions of [their] fathers' (Alma 30:13, 15, 27)." Having established the fundamental presuppositions of Korihor's position, Robinson then proceeded for much of the remainder of his review to show that "precisely these same naturalistic assumptions" were at work in, and promoted by, Vogel's *The Word of God.*

In doing so, Professor Robinson seems to me to have used the Book of Mormon for one of the purposes that it was designed to serve. Ezra Taft Benson, thirteenth president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has taught us that "God, with his infinite foreknowledge, so molded the Book of Mormon that we might see the error and know how to combat false educational, political, religious, and philosophical concepts of our time." Furthermore, on the specific matter in question here, a recent *Ensign* article quite rightly points out that

Korihor's teachings are old doctrine, and yet they are ideas as modern as today's high-speed printing presses and satellite dishes. . . . This is undoubtedly why, under the power of inspiration, Mormon gave his detailed account of Korihor and his false

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31 Ibid. Compare Ashment, "Canon and the Historian," 10; "Historiography of the Canon," 288: "The Enlightenment was founded on the challenge to mankind to think for themselves." It was a "declaration of independence against every authority that rests on the dictatorial command, 'Obey, don't think.' " Ashment then cites the notorious 1945 ward teaching message that said that, when the General Authorities speak, "the thinking has been done." (This is also a favorite text of George D. Smith. He cites it as an example of Mormon irrationalism at "Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon," *Free Inquiry* 4 [Winter 1983/84]: 27.) The article "A 1945 Perspective," in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19 (Spring 1986): 35-39, should have laid this hackneyed old chestnut to rest for good—but, in at least some circles, it has not.


33 Ezra Taft Benson, "The Book of Mormon Is the Word of God," *Ensign* 18 (January 1988): 3. "The type of apostates in the Book of Mormon are similar to the type we have today."
teachings—so that we today may more easily distinguish between Christ and anti-Christ, between eternal life and spiritual death.\textsuperscript{34}

While others are certainly free to dispute Stephen Robinson’s specific attempt to apply the Book of Mormon’s account of Korihor to contemporary thinking, I do not see that believing Latter-day Saints can disallow his attempt in principle. But it is striking that, although some at Signature have bristled at the “Korihor” label, so far as I am aware nobody has denied Professor Robinson’s substantive grounds for assigning it. It is rather as if someone were to label a man a “Benedict Arnold”—and to allege specific reasons for doing so—only to have the accused or his defenders respond merely that it isn’t nice to call people “Benedict Arnolds,” and that one should be more polite. This is an important point. In the New Jersey federal case alluded to above, the court held that a critic’s privilege to speak his or her mind remains intact if the facts are truly stated, and if the critic’s comments are fair and an honest expression of his or her opinion. In ruling against the author and publisher of \textit{Casino Gambling for the Winner}, Judge Sarokin wrote that “Plaintiffs have not challenged or refuted the accuracy of any of the facts asserted by defendants, and a reasonable reader is given sufficient information from which to make up his or her own mind on the opinion stated.”\textsuperscript{35}

Was Professor Robinson’s language strong? Indisputably. “You have irresponsibly supported an attempt to besmirch the professional reputation of other scholars,” one enraged letter-writer to the \textit{Salt Lake Tribune} informed me.\textsuperscript{36} Was Professor Robinson’s article a violation of the law, or legally actionable? I very much doubt it. (Bill Russell, one of the contributors to Vogel’s book and a lawyer himself, would later admit in a published letter that he saw “no reason for George [Smith] to sue

\textsuperscript{34} Lund, “Countering Korihor’s Philosophy,” 20-21. Lund explicitly identifies the secular humanism of “Humanist Manifesto II” as Korihor-like. Interestingly, George D. Smith has associated himself with advocates of that secular humanist position. See the review by Louis Midgley on pp. 5-12 of the present volume.


I would rather hope that, in the words of the 1990 Supreme Court decision, public discussion and disputation in Mormondom "will not suffer for lack of imaginative expression or the rhetorical hyperbole which has traditionally added much to the discourse of our Nation" and which, that court expressly declared, has received "full constitutional protection." 

**Calling Names, or Naming Names?**

No serious Christian, however, would want to guide his or her personal life solely on the basis of the law's minimal requirements. There is a higher standard. Something may be legal, yes, and yet unethical, unwise, or unkind. So is there any place for sharp language in the intellectual life of the Latter-day Saints? What should be its limits? What is "name-calling"?

In a certain sense, the answer to the first question is clear. Whatever one may think of its desirability, sharp invective has historically played an important role in public life. One has only to thumb through Leon Harris's wonderful survey of *The Fine Art of Political Wit* to realize how pervasive and even enlivening has been the use of name-calling and biting humor at the most exalted levels of Anglo-American political discourse.

But it goes beyond politics. Sharp epithets are hardly foreign to the groves of academe. Scholars, too, can occasionally grow very exercised and intense, even in the highest and most respectable academic circles. They can be rough, sometimes nasty. I offer two recent examples, selected, not from the writings of redneck obscurantists, but from the flagship journals of the two most prestigious North American organizations dedicated to the academic study of religion.

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37 Letter from Bill Russell, *Provo Daily Herald*, 11 September 1991. This opinion was also expressed by another of the authors, in private conversation with a colleague of mine. Yet another contributor told a mutual acquaintance that Signature's legal posturing was "silly."

38 *Milковich v. Lorain-Journal Co.*, 110 S. Ct. 2695, 2706 (1990). "A great tradition of the American bar is under increasing attack," laments Dean Gerald F. Uelmen, of the Santa Clara University School of Law. "The tradition I refer to is name-calling." Thus opens his amusing article "Id.," 335-48, in the course of which he gives many examples of what he terms "the art of invective."

First, let's consider briefly the Fall 1991 issue of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. Published by the venerable Society of Biblical Literature, it includes an article by Professor Ben F. Meyer, of McMaster University in Ontario, entitled "A Caricature of Joachim Jeremias and His Scholarly Work." Meyer's essay is a response to what he perceives as a "rancorous charge of incompetence and dishonesty," "an increasingly reckless campaign of misrepresentation by [Duke University's] Prof. E. P. Sanders," directed against one of the most eminent German New Testament scholars of this century. (Joachim Jeremias had, for example, received honorary doctorates from the universities of Leipzig, St. Andrews, Oxford, and Uppsala, and had been granted the Burkitt medal by the British Academy.) As summarized by Meyer, Sanders has indicted Jeremias as "an ignoramus and a fraud," insinuated that he was an anti-Semite, and linked him with the Nazi holocaust. He has somehow chosen Jeremias as "a favorite target, butt, and whipping boy." Sanders calls Jeremias's work "fraudulent" and "bogus." It is, he says, "a complete distortion of the evidence. The distortion is so great that it must have been intentional." Sanders, Meyer writes, wanted to show that Jeremias was something of a "simpleton," guilty of "incompetence."

Meyer responds that Sanders himself is guilty of "fanciful misreading," and "has reduced Jeremias's carefully articulated views to an obscure and silly-sounding muddle." Indeed, his interpretation is "repellant and gratuitous," and certain elements of it—"red herrings"—have been flat-out "invented... in the service of polemic belittlement." In Sanders's "thoroughly garbled" exposition of the writings of Jeremias, which Meyer prefers to term an "attack" or "assault," Meyer is willing to admit only "one or two particulars... that are accurate." "On every point Sanders's exposition is flatly mistaken." What is not "pure fabrication," "simply false," is "tendentious," "a gross travesty," "a flat misrepresentation." And all of this, Meyer says, was written in a spirit of "agitated aggressivity." Some examples of Sanders's "tissue of errors" are "irritatingly recurrent." One is "especially ridiculous." Finally, Meyer closes with what seems a thinly veiled charge of insanity against Sanders and his "misguided campaign." Joachim Jeremias, he says,

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was neither a fraud nor a simpleton nor an anti-Semite, but a great scholar and a great human being. Sanders’s misreadings of Jeremias are more numerous than those that I have dealt with here or have the will to deal with anywhere. All in all, I take the distortion to be great, so great that it must be unintentional—compulsive rather than intentional, though I claim no insight into the compulsion. 41

Unintimidated, E. P. Sanders responds in the same issue with an essay entitled “Defending the Indefensible.” 42 “Professor Meyer,” he declares in his opening sentence, “could not have chosen a worse cause to champion nor a worse method to employ.” While denying that he has ever really thought that Joachim Jeremias was an anti-Semite, Sanders claims that Jeremias’s writings are “bad,” and that they do “harm.” Certain of Jeremias’s views must be described as “palpably false and, further, ridiculous.” This is not surprising, since Jeremias shows a “lack of methodological control and a surfeit of bad judgment.” Sanders repeats his contention that Jeremias’s alleged distortion of evidence must have been “deliberate”—unless, perhaps, it was the German scholar’s “subconscious” that led him into self-deception.

Sanders accuses Meyer of “misrepresenting” both Jeremias and himself. “Meyer here as elsewhere has carefully selected a few words, taken them out of their context, and by not mentioning what precedes and what follows has attempted to make the reader think that he has given the thrust of Jeremias’s argument.” And this, Sanders charges, is quite “deliberate.” “Meyer attempts to mislead” (emphasis mine), following “the technique of misleading by selective quotation employed by . . . Jeremias” himself. “Selective quotation that misleads the reader” is, in fact, one of the two “chief characteristic[s] of Meyer’s essay.” There are only a “very few accurate sentences in his essay.” Some are simply “false.” “I do not have space to reply to every criticism,” Sanders wearily tells his readers, “but those that I do not mention are even less well founded than those to which I reply.” One portion of Meyer’s essay is “bewildering,”

in fact "almost unbelievably erroneous." Meyer, Sanders says, is "fantasizing."

Fortunately for all concerned, nothing in the reviews written by Richard Anderson, Louis Midgley, or Stephen Robinson begins to approach the vehemence of such invective.

Another exchange occurs in a recent issue of the Journal of the American Academy of Religion. It features Margaret R. Miles, Bussey Professor of Theology at Harvard Divinity School, and John W. Dixon, Jr., an art historian now retired from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who had earlier offered a not-entirely laudatory review of one of her books. Professor Miles describes Professor Dixon’s review as "inaccurate, unfair, and mean-spirited," calling it a "gratuitous attack" and a "trash job." It had, she claims, "the hidden agenda" of "an attempt to stifle experimentation and creativity." Using "sarcasm, scorn, and name-calling," it subjected her to "the worst kind of punishment at [academics'] disposal—the public spectacle of the nasty review." She seems, further, to imply that the essay is sexist.

Professor Dixon was unrepentant. "Professor Miles," he wrote, "chooses not to challenge any of the substantive issues raised in my review." Instead, Professor Dixon remarked, she had chosen to describe him and his essay with "many pejorative epithets," as well as with "gratuitous and invidious" misreadings.

Now, it is not my intention here to take a stand on the dispute between Professors Miles and Dixon, or on that between Meyer and Sanders. (I must say, however, that Dixon’s review seems to me balanced, and far from "mean spirited," "sarcastic," or "name-calling." But those interested may judge this for themselves.) I merely point out how rough academic debate can sometimes be, especially when important values are called into question. And I note with great interest that, so far as I am able to determine, neither side in either of the two debates has summoned the state to silence or to punish the other. "Now let’s be honest," Katharine Whittemore remarks in an article fittingly entitled "Dead Sea Squabbles." "Character assassination isn’t all...

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that unusual in charged academic milieus." But lawsuits aimed at academic opponents are, to put it mildly, extremely unusual.

Professor Miles mentions in her response that she had written to the Book Review Editor of the Journal in May 1988 "to ask him to reconsider publication" of what she had heard was a very negative review, but that her efforts were unavailing. This draws a sharp rebuke from Professor Dixon: "Professor Miles describes her attempt to suppress my review. That is, she attempted to block publication of a review she had not read, written by someone she has never met, because she does not like the way he reviews books. Then she accuses me of being uncollegial! Censorship is profoundly uncollegial. Does Professor Miles not recognize the implications of what she is saying?" Finally, Professor Dixon expresses amazement about the whole episode. "I was bemused," he writes, "to be told that I, in retirement and wholly separated from teaching and institutional involvements, am able to reduce to persecuted powerlessness the holder of a named professorship in the Divinity School of our most prestigious university."45

Professor Dixon's reaction here is analogous to my own. I would never have imagined that three negative book reviews could draw so harsh a response from a richly endowed publishing house like Signature Books. That is why I mistook the first threat of legal action for a joke. "Censorship," as Professor Dixon says, "is profoundly uncollegial."

Some, I know, will say that it is un-Christian and uncharitable to label others at all. (Ironically, in this connection, Professor England labels F.A.R.M.S. as "aggressively proud of its orthodoxy . . . and [not] very merciful.")46 "The trouble with people like you," said one academic colleague of mine, unsympathetic to my stance in the exchange with Signature Books, "is your tendency to categorize others." But his very comment illustrates the inevitability of such categorization. Without classifying like things and segregating unlike things, we cannot think.47 True, we often categorize badly, and, dealing

47 Aristotle’s "Categories" comes first among his logical works (the Organon), which, in turn, precede all of his other treatises in their usual arrangement.
with human beings, we sometimes categorize uncharitably or unfairly. But we cannot not do it. In fact, I am convinced that, without an ability to name and distinguish things, we cannot even see what is around us. What is more, if we are to know things as they are and to be able to navigate reality with any degree of confidence, it is desirable that we do so. It is not “absurd.”

As to the question of whether Christians are permitted the use of sharp epithets, the answer, again, seems clear. For Christ himself often labeled those who opposed him “serpents,” a “generation of vipers,” “hypocrites,” “blind guides” and “whited sepulchres” (Matthew 12:34; 23:23-27, 33). Granted that its use should be infrequent, the question of when such language might be justified is a difficult one. What separates appropriate use from inappropriate? As editor, I judged that the language used by the F.A.R.M.S. reviewers last year—really extraordinarily mild language, when compared with the kind of invective I have been discussing here—was well within bounds.

The people at Signature Books disagreed. But it seems apparent that they themselves might have difficulty with determining the proper limits of name-calling. Signature Books did, after all, publish Paul Toscano’s preachy and mean-spirited parodies of Latter-day Saint hymns—in which, among other

48 In RBBM 2 (1990): xxiv-xxv, I used an agricultural illustration to make a related point: “I was raised in the city; my father was raised on a North Dakota farm and, for a time, studied forestry. When we have driven through rural areas together, I have seen flat spaces of green or brown, with palm trees or pine-like trees or (the largest category) ‘other trees.’ My father, however, sees alfalfa at various stages of maturity, wheat, oats, corn, elms, oaks, firs, spruce, pines, and much, much more.” To know the names of trees and plants is to see them, I believe, in a way that the casual passerby, ignorant of their names and distinctions, cannot. Examples could be multiplied. To know “expressionism” and “cubism” and “surrealism” opens up modern art, just as the ability to distinguish “baroque” from “classical” and “romantic” from “atonal” helps one to appreciate serious music. Of course, to have wrong names is, very possibly, to see (or hear) wrongly. I do not minimize the need for caution and constant self-correction.
things, Church leaders are portrayed as insensitive, greedy, self-aggrandizing, and exploiting women in order to attain their unrighteous ambitions. The General Authorities, for Toscano, are “guarded by God’s own gestapo” (i.e., the personnel of Church security) who, “full of paranoid delusions,” “attempt to guarantee/That our modern, living prophets/Don’t confront reality.” Furthermore, Mormons seek political power so that—as Toscano expresses it on their behalf—“in one sweeping motion we’ll mandate devotion and teach our oppressors new ways to oppress.” Professors of Religious Education at Brigham Young University are mocked as “holier than thou ... as holy as a sacred cow,” and are painted as so distracted by their consuming ambition to be General Authorities that they cannot or will not teach. Toscano also lectures his readers on what real “Mormon doctrine” is, as opposed to the “party line” espoused by the Brethren and “spoon-fed” to the membership at large. Church courts, we are informed, lawlessly expel members “on a baseless rumor or some hearsay facts.” Ordinary Latter-day Saints, as depicted in this Signature Books publication, arrogantly deny divine grace and trust that their own righteousness will put God in their debt. “Praise us to whom all blessings flow,” they sing. “Bless us, your favorites, here below. Praise us above the heavenly host. We are the ones you

50 “Making bucks is so much easier/Than kneeling down to pray.” “If the poor would make more money, we would love them . . .” “We’ll sell you our souls, in exchange for your gold.” Ibid., 3, 75, 87. Compare pp. 43, 85.
51 “Influence, influence/We can afford the price./Influence is so much easier/Than making sacrifice.” “It’s the praises of the world we adore./We’ll do anything we can to get more./We’ll change our ways from former days/For the praises of the world.” Ibid., 3, 5.
52 Ibid., 47.
53 Ibid., 11.
54 Ibid., 71.
55 Ibid., 19.
56 Ibid., 57, 83.
57 Ibid., 63.
58 Ibid., 27, 29, 41, 43.
prize the most.”59 I find Toscano’s lyrics quite remarkably unfunny. But, more importantly, such language strikes me as having overstepped the line between humor and sacrilege.

And what of Vogel’s The Word of God? The contributors to that volume tend to caricature Latter-day Saints as inerrantists, naïve “literalists,” “traditionalists,” and “fundamentalist apologists.”60 Professor Hugh Nibley is dismissively referred to as a “Mormon apologist”—which is apparently meant to imply that he is not, really, a scholar.61 Edward Ashment even accuses Nibley of having “a Machiavellian approach” to historiography—whatever that dark and damning expression may mean—and refers to Dr. Nibley’s “apparent antipathy against scholarship.”62 Indeed, Mr. Ashment discerns a general “lack of scholarship” among those “LDS authors” whose approach differs from his, and writes off as “obscurantist” what he himself describes as “a plethora of material dealing with archaeology and the Book of

59 Ibid., 59. Compare p. 77: “O praise us! We’re so special!”
61 Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, “Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Cosmology,” in Vogel, The Word of God, 219. Ashment’s “Canon and the Historian” and “Historiography of the Canon” are densely populated with “Mormon apologists.” Their desperate antics are contrasted unfavorably with a reified “historiographic methodology,” a kind of sternly Platonic archetype in the presence of which their pseudo-scholarship stands everlastingly revealed for the shabby thing it really is.
62 Edward H. Ashment, “Reducing Dissonance: The Book of Abraham as a Case Study,” in Vogel, The Word of God, 230. Ashment appears to favor what might be termed a “Great Man technique” in ad hominem assaults. At a meeting some years ago in California, he sought to discredit a scholar with whom he disagreed, but whose arguments he did not care to address, by linking the man with the forces of “irrationalism”—among whom he identified not only the Ayatollah Khomeini, but Plato! It may well be, of course, that Nibley’s “antipathy,” or a generalized Latter-day Saint “irrationalism,” reflects a more realistic view of the limits of scholarship. Steven Epperson, in his review of Dan Vogel, ed., The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture, in Brigham Young University Studies 31 (Summer 1991): 67, finds that Ashment “invests the tentative findings of scholarly historical research with a burden of certitude [they] cannot bear.”
Mormon, the historicity of its contents, and the historicity of the ‘Selections from the Book of Moses’ and the Book of Abraham.’ He names no specific articles or books, but evidently intends to stigmatize all materials, as a class, that are designed ‘to convince the reader of the historicity of the LDS scriptures, thus somehow proving the truthfulness of LDS theology.’ And Rodger Anderson, in his *Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined*, accuses Nibley of ‘high-handedness’ and ‘a lack of scholarly standards.’ Nibley, Anderson claims, is guilty of ‘misrepresentation,’ of ‘misquotation’ and ‘misphrasing,’ and betrays ‘a tendency to suppress information’ that can only be ‘intentional.’ “Nibley’s argument fails on every significant point,” claims Anderson. “Illogic, unsupported speculation, specious charges, misrepresentation, factual errors, indiscriminate and arbitrary use of sources, disregard of context, and a lack of scholarly standards characterize [Nibley’s *The Myth...*/

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63 Edward H. Ashment, “Making the Scriptures ‘Indeed One in Our Hands,’ ” in Vogel, *The Word of God*, 251-52. I am intrigued by the charge of “pseudo-scholarship,” which, it will be recalled, showed up in the first letter I received from a Signature official, and which seems to be something of a favorite among certain writers affiliated with Signature Books. How would one test such a charge? It seems somehow to transcend objective measurement. Nevertheless, although I don’t for a moment think that a degree necessarily makes a scholar, I rather suspect that degrees suggest something. So I looked at the three reviewers who had angered the Signature official, and found among them three Ph.D.s (from Berkeley, Brown, and Duke), one also having a J.D. (from Harvard Law School). Then I looked at the fifteen authors in Dan Vogel’s anthology, and at Rodger I. Anderson—sixteen people in all—and found, as near as I can tell, two law degrees, one medical degree, and one Ph.D. Counting professional degrees as equivalent to a Ph.D., the data yielded 1.33 doctorates per F.A.R.M.S. reviewer, as opposed to 0.25 doctorates per Signature writer. If professional degrees are not counted, the doctorate score is F.A.R.M.S. reviewers 1.00, Signature authors 0.06. As Achilles would have said, this insight may be “a small thing, but it’s mine.” (Homer, *Iliad*, I.167; my translation.)

64 Anderson, *Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined*, 14, 18. These epithets are also cited in an article in the Provo Daily Herald, 9 June 1991, which seems to reflect a press release from Signature Books.

65 Ibid., 21, 17.
Even Roger Launius’s somewhat favorable review of Rodger Anderson’s book noticed its “sarcasm.”

“As satire is hostile by nature,” one authority points out, “it inevitably arouses hostility.” Clearly, the subject of name-calling, of its use and abuse, merits discussion along with the various other elements of sharp, satirical writing. “Satire does not flourish in the Mormon culture,” Elouise Bell has written, “and with good reason—it is dangerous.” (The more profound reason, I think, is that satire can easily cross the line into cruelty or injustice—something that ought to concern any professing Christian.) “The only thing more dangerous than satire,” says Bell, “is its absence.” Unfortunately, calm discussion of the limits of satirical writing is not furthered by resorting to attorneys. In their despicable account of the Hofmann murders, Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith ridicule “the great, grinning goodness of Mormon culture, . . . a vast landscape of mashed potatoes.” Like so much else in their book, this stereotype is ignorant and unfair. If, however, Latter-day Saint intellectual life is to be patrolled by squads of libel lawyers, we may yet attain to the blandness of pure starch.

“I am not what I am”

It will perhaps be helpful, in considering the “infantile name-calling” supposedly indulged in by F.A.R.M.S., to concentrate upon the two specific charges made against the reviewers by Signature’s lawyer. The first charge mentioned in his letter was that F.A.R.M.S. had alleged Signature Books and the authors involved in the Vogel and Anderson books to be “dishonest.”

Is this true? Well, yes and no. Stephen Robinson indeed raised the issue of “dishonesty.” However, he had reference

66 Ibid., 22.
69 Elouise Bell, review of Neal Chandler, Benediction: A Book of Stories, in Brigham Young University Studies 30 (Fall 1990): 88.
specifically to Dan Vogel's book, and not to any particular individual connected with it or with Signature. What would constitute "deception" in the world of writing and publishing? This question, too, demands open discussion. Is it possible to charge a book with dishonesty, without thereby implicating its author(s) and publishers? Perhaps and perhaps not. Louis Midgley is, I think, correct in his assertion that "books . . . do not just happen; they are intentional acts." Nevertheless, critics often assert of a work of art or scholarship that it is "dishonest" or "inauthentic," without directly asserting the dishonesty of artist or author. Those who wish to infer such dishonesty are certainly free to do so, but they cannot claim that it was directly asserted by the critic. And, indeed, it is not at all clear that a book's "dishonesty" is precisely the same kind of thing as an individual person's "dishonesty," even if that person is the author of the book. Furthermore, intellectual dishonesty is not a crime. (If it were, most political commentators would be in jail.) What, though, should we do if we perceive disingenuousness in a publication? Should we be punished if our perception is inaccurate? Are charges of intellectual dishonesty slanderous or libelous?

Roger Rosenblatt's Life Itself: Abortion in the American Mind was reviewed very recently by Hadley Arkes, the distinguished Edward Ney Professor of Jurisprudence at Amherst College. His review should soon demonstrate whether or not I am correct that it is not legally actionable to say that a book is "dishonest." Professor Arkes speaks of "layers of subterfuge" and "layers of incomprehension" in Rosenblatt's book. He claims to reveal "the levels of deception that have been built—quite deliberately—into its design." "Random House, that most urbane of publishers, has offered a work on the assumption that the reading public is composed of hicks, with inexhaustible layers of gullibility." (Do the Anderson, Midgley, and Robinson reviews subject Signature Books and its authors to anything rougher than this?) After watching Amherst's Edward Ney Professor of Jurisprudence blast through all those layers of "subterfuge," "incomprehension," "gullibility," and "deception," we can only wait to see if

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Random House's urbane masters will sue him. My bet is that they will not.

But there is more to be said on this issue. Was Stephen Robinson's allusion to "dishonesty" in Vogel's collection produced from thin air? Apparently not, since other observers have noted the same thing. Thus, for instance, in a review produced independently of Robinson's and Midgley's, Professor Kent P. Jackson questions "whether the editor and some of the authors either knowingly or unknowingly disguise their presuppositions." Furthermore, Jackson finds certain elements of the book "misleading."

The contributors are careful to present themselves as intellectuals motivated strictly by academic interests, and they remain for the most part detached and unemotional. The image thus portrayed is intended, I presume, to be that of scholars doing what scholars do—examining the LDS canon with objectivity, employing the best of methodological skills, and drawing sound and defensible conclusions. In my view, this portrayal is less than honest.

And this is just one instance of what seems a recurrent and oft-remarked pattern of misleading packaging. "Signature," noted Professor Robinson, "has lately developed a habit of disguising the critical stance of its works with misleading titles." Professor Midgley remarked that, with the publication of *The Word of God*, "Signature Books again manifests a fondness for a catchy title masking the real contents of a book." For Vogel's book seems clearly to advance, rather, "the claim that Mormon scripture is not in any genuine sense the word of God, but merely language generated by cultural and environmental forces." Reverend Larry W. Conrad, a former member of the Reorganized Church now serving as a Methodist minister, reviewed *The Word of God* for the John Whitmer Historical Association and came up with an analogous observation. "Despite the book's title," he noted, "the emphasis

74 Jackson, "How Not to Read the Scriptures," 1.
75 Ibid., 22.
78 Ibid, 300 (emphasis mine).
in this volume is clearly on what the RLDS church historian calls ‘the human element in revelation and scripture’ (17). The fifteen essays give little space to the divine element or ways the scriptures might mediate the divine presence and transform human existence.” Professor Jackson, indeed, finds the title “distasteful” for that very reason.

Numerous other instances could be cited. For instance, the 1989 anthology entitled Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine “seems to rest on the assumption that what the Saints believe to have been revealed over time to Joseph Smith was inconsistent and discontinuous, and hence not, as the title of the book would seem to indicate, a coherent setting forth of an essentially consistent body of teachings bit by bit.” On 31 May 1991, Rodger I. Anderson’s book Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined received the Mormon History Association’s Best First Book award. This was quite an honor, I suppose, although I have no idea how many “first books” were in the running for such an award. And at least one of the judges was unaware that Anderson’s work had actually already been published over a decade before, in the Journal of Pastoral Practice, where it was sponsored by the late Reverend Wesley P. Walters, “an ardent opponent of Mormonism”—something not mentioned in the book itself.

An additional example of what I have termed “misleading packaging” merits more lengthy examination: In 1980, the little-known Clayton Publishing House, based in St. Louis, published Robert N. Hullinger’s Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon. The book


80 Jackson, “How Not to Read the Scriptures,” 23.


82 The phrase is from Marvin Hill, “The ‘New Mormon History’ Reassessed in Light of Recent Books on Joseph Smith and Mormon Origins,” Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 21 (Autumn 1988): 117; cf. the eulogy offered by Utah Missions, Inc., in its fiercely anti-Mormon Evangel 37 (December 1990): 1, which says of Reverend Walters that “he was a valuable resource in the work.” The earlier publication of Rodger Anderson’s material is documented at pp. 307-8 of Midgley’s review. The judge’s unawareness of this fact was expressed in personal conversation.
carried an approving "Foreword" by Wesley Walters. In his own "Preface," the book's author offered "a special word of gratitude" to Reverend Walters.83 "His standard of scholarship and painstaking detail set a goal toward which I strained in completing this study."84 And what is that standard of scholarship? Linking Reverend Walters with Jerald and Sandra Tanner in a 1982 article on the First Vision, Professor Marvin S. Hill—not generally known as a Mormon apologist—noted "the rigid framework within which they perceive their subject, the invariably negative conclusions they reach, the frequent resort to dogmatic declarations, and the finality they assume for their work." Furthermore, he remarked, "The sources Walters and the Tanners employ, the conclusions they reach, the places where they publish, and their strong anti-Mormon missionary activities suggest they have other than scholarly concerns." Speaking specifically of Reverend Walters, Professor Hill said that his "scholarship is one of sectarian advantage, not objectivity."85 Yet Wesley Walters represents the scholarly standard "toward which [Robert Hullinger] strained" in creating *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon.* And now the 1992-1993 catalogue of Signature Books announces republication of Hullinger's book—which received less than deafening applause from the scholarly community in its first incarnation—under the title *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism.* Why? And why has the book's revealing subtitle been suppressed?

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George O. Smith’s published reply to my letter noted that I had “accused Signature Books of devious ‘packaging and marketing.’” “Peterson,” he said, “did not elaborate.” But if “Peterson did not elaborate,” neither did Smith. Significantly, while he mentioned it, Mr. Smith never really addressed my allegation of a pattern of misleading marketing and packaging on the part of Signature Books, nor my perception of “disingenuous if not dishonest” rhetoric, nor my claim that he and Signature Books manifest an agenda “hostile to centrally important beliefs of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” (One recalls the fellow who, accused of having murdered ten men and a dog, triumphantly produced the dog. In this case, though, I see no dog.)

Do publishers have a duty to identify their materials in a way that will not mislead readers? The reviewers and I think that they do. Perhaps others do not, or do not feel that Signature has misled potential buyers of its books. Once again, this is a subject that cries out for calm, open discussion, not for legal action.

And Then There Were Two

Our impression that Signature can be less than candid was reinforced by the odd instance of an advertisement that appeared in the July 1991 issue of BYU Today. It bore photographs of the covers of the Vogel and Anderson volumes, and proclaimed them to be both “awarded books” (somewhat awkward, that) and “rewarding reading.” A short paragraph about Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined congratulated Rodger I. Anderson on his award from the Mormon History Association. Another paragraph referred to Dan Vogel’s anthology as “including the perspectives of five active LDS scholars, five active RLDS scholars, and two non-Mormon
INTRODUCTION

It seems likely that the advertisement was intended as a direct response to the reviews of Midgley and Robinson. The stress on the word “active” certainly points in this direction, as does the choice of these particular books for emphasis from among Signature’s numerous publications.

Of particular interest, though, is the ad’s list of “five active LDS scholars, five active RLDS scholars, and two non-Mormon scholars.” This yields a total of twelve scholars. Yet there are fifteen contributors to the volume, if the posthumously conscripted John A. Widtsoe is not counted. (Perhaps Elder Widtsoe was one of the “active LDS scholars”?) Why bother to enumerate contributors if you aren’t going to enumerate all of them? What happened to the other three contributors? Why are they not included? If they do not fit into the threefold categorization of active LDS/active RLDS/non-Mormon, where do they fit?

And this is not the only arithmetical difficulty. In his “Editor’s Introduction” to The Word of God, Dan Vogel had observed that “All but one of the following fifteen essays... were written by Mormons from either the LDS or RLDS tradition. (The exception is Susan Curtis.)”86 This seems to suggest that fourteen of the writers are either LDS or RLDS. Comparing this with the advertisement’s claim of “five active LDS scholars [and] five active RLDS scholars,” we seem to come up with a remainder of four scholars who are neither “active LDS” nor “active RLDS.” This is helpful.87 But, astonishingly and without warning, between the publication of The Word of God and the appearance of the advertisement a new non-member suddenly manifested himself among the book’s contributors. For, although Dan Vogel’s “Editor’s Introduction” speaks of one non-Mormon, the advertisement acknowledges two. How did this happen?

My guess is that the new non-Mormon was Dan Vogel. Of course, he was not really new, exactly, because he was apparently a “former member” of the Church already in 1982, and probably as early as 1981. Reverend Wesley P. Walters,

87 A close examination of the notes on the contributors that occur at the end of The Word of God suggests that most, at least, of the writers who are inactive in their traditions are LDS, rather than RLDS. I suspect that all of the inactives are LDS.
introducing Mr. Vogel to readers of the anti-Mormon Journal of Pastoral Practice, remarked of him in 1982 that

Dan Vogel, a former member and missionary of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, over a year ago made the difficult decision to leave the Mormon Church.\(^8\)

It seems odd that Mr. Vogel could have forgotten this “difficult decision” by 1990, when The Word of God was published, and to have continued to count himself, in his “Editor’s Introduction,” among “Mormons from either the LDS or RLDS tradition.” But life is full of surprises. Whatever the case, it may have been Louis Midgley’s citation of the Wesley Walters introduction that jogged Mr. Vogel’s memory.

When Matthew Roper publicly wondered how “a former member” of the Church, Dan Vogel, could ever have described himself as a “Mormon” scholar, Signature’s Gary Bergera responded rather blandly that Vogel was, well, “from the LDS tradition.”\(^8\) Of course, so were Philastus Hurlbut, John C. Bennett, Butch Cassidy, and Fawn Brodie. So, today, are Jerald and Sandra Tanner, Bill Schnoebelen, Charles Larson, Ed Decker, and Loftes Tryk.

“The Mantle of Walters the Magician”

The lawyer’s second charge was that F.A.R.M.S. had alleged Signature Books and the authors involved in the Vogel and Anderson books to be “anti-Mormon.” Professor Robinson did indeed express himself straightforwardly:

> It is dishonest to pass off ex-Latter-day Saints, non-Latter-day Saints, Reorganized Latter-day Saints, disaffected Latter-day Saints, and hard-core anti-Latter-day Saints as “Mormon” essayists. Give me a Walter Martin anytime, a good stout wolf with his

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\(^8\) Roper’s letter appeared in the Utah County Journal, 6 September 1991, and the Provo Daily Herald, 10 September 1991; Bergera’s reply ran in the Provo Daily Herald, 8 October 1991. Roper concluded, “If George Smith or Dan Vogel or some of their friends wince at criticism of their great and spacious building, perhaps they should seek safer lodgings.”
own fur on, instead of those more timid or sly parading around in their ridiculous fleeces with their teeth and tails hanging out. Give me “Ex-Mormons for Jesus” or the Moody Bible Tract Society, who are at least honest about their anti-Mormon agenda, instead of Signature Books camouflaged as a “Latter-day Saint” press. I prefer my anti-Mormons straight up.90

Again one has to ask, What does it mean to be “anti-Mormon”? Was Robinson’s use of this term his own, idiosyncratic, out-of-the-blue misreading of the situation? Or have others reacted in the same way? And if others have reacted in the same manner, might there be plausible grounds for such a judgment? In fact, writing independently, Professor Jackson judges Vogel’s collection in precisely the same way.

The articles in this book systematically attack [basic LDS beliefs] by dismissing them (through a variety of methodological tricks) or by redefining them into nothingness. The resulting product, The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture, is a state-of-the-art attack on the LDS faith and those things about it that cause its members to believe it to be of God. Though the authors assume the role of friendly in-house critics motivated by an enlightened desire to view the gospel through the lens of modern scholarship, it seems to this reviewer that their objectives ultimately differ very little from those of critics motivated by narrow sectarian bias. Where religious bigots attack the Church’s fundamental beliefs to dismiss them as the musings of a non-Christian cult, Vogel’s contributors attack those same fundamental beliefs to dismiss them as naive and unenlightened—unable to stand the test of modern scholarly scrutiny. Though the method differs, the objective is the same. Vogel and his contributors have entered a genre as old as the Church itself: this is an anti-Mormon book.91

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91 Jackson, “How Not to Read the Scriptures,” 2; cf. 19.
“This is an anti-Mormon book,” Professor Jackson continues, “because it does what anti-Mormon books do: it seeks to discredit Joseph Smith and the restoration. . . . Aside from the cover of ‘scholarship’ under which Vogel and most of his fellow contributors operate, I can see very little that separates this effort from those of the more candid anti-Mormons.” The only real difference that he can detect is that Vogel’s book is “much more subtle” than the general run-of-the-mill anti-Mormon production.92

This should not have been surprising. Marvin Hill, one of Signature’s own authors, published an article in 1988 in which he attempted to describe a spectrum of writing on Latter-day Saint history, with a desirable “center” distinguished from two less desirable “wings” on the “right” and the “left.” “On the left,” he declared, “was a group who insisted that Mormonism was historically untrue, a religious corruption, and a fraud.” Hill explicitly placed Dan Vogel “on the left,” as “a disaffected Mormon,” and observed of him that “he tends at times to be dogmatic, a characteristic of many of the far left opponents of Mormonism.” (The phrase “opponent of Mormonism” seems, to me at least, to be essentially equivalent to “anti-Mormon.”) Professor Hill felt that “Vogel has done some research well,” but noted that “he tends to depend heavily on Wesley Walters at key points.”93 And Grant Underwood, in a 1990 review of Vogel’s earlier Signature publication, Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism,94 noted Vogel’s one-time connection with Reverend Walters’s anti-Mormon Journal of Pastoral Practice and suggested that, “while he has learned [in the meantime] to package his argument so as to make it more palatable to Latter-day Saints, Religious Seekers is actually one more in a long line of books attempting to show that Mormonism was more derivative than divine.”95 Underwood expressly dismisses

92 Ibid., 22. Note the implication of dishonesty or disingenuousness.
93 Marvin Hill, “The ‘New Mormon History’ Reassessed,” 124. It is of interest to note that Signature Books did not threaten Professor Hill with a lawsuit over his description of Vogel; indeed, they published his Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism, a work of serious historical scholarship, the following year.
94 Dan Vogel, Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988).
95 Note, again, an implication of deceptiveness or disingenuousness.
several of Vogel’s contentions as “not profound new historical truths, but old anti-Mormon chestnuts.”

It is not so very far from these perceptions to the comments of the F.A.R.M.S. reviewers. Stephen E. Robinson, for instance, remarked that

For years anti-Mormons have hammered the Church from the outside, insisting that Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saint scriptures he produced were not what they claimed to be. By and large the Latter-day Saints simply ignored these attacks. Whether Signature Books and its authors will convince the Saints of the same hostile propositions by attacking from the inside remains to be seen. . . . What the anti-Mormons couldn’t do with a frontal assault of contradiction, Signature and Vogel would now accomplish with a flanking maneuver of redefinition.”

Professor Midgley, also noting Vogel’s previous association with the late Reverend Wesley Walters, suggested that “he has found a new patron in George D. Smith, owner of Signature Books, who seems to have gone through a somewhat similar shift from his previous, more blatant forms of anti-Mormon polemics to a smoother, less abrasive and less direct approach attempting to mold and transform the Mormon faith.”

What of George D. Smith, the wealthy northern California businessman who bankrolls Signature Books? Is it implausible to describe him as in some sense “anti-Mormon”? No, it is not. Mark Hofmann and Steven F. Christensen, the Latter-day Saint bishop who was Hofmann’s first bombing victim, both seem to have characterized George D. Smith as an “anti-Mormon” and to have linked him closely with Wesley

99 Mr. Smith was also a prime financial backer of the Seventh East Press, the controversial off-campus newspaper that operated near Brigham Young University from 1981 to 1983.
Walters. Did they have reason to do so? It would seem that they did, in view of such items as Mr. Smith’s 1983 article in the secular humanist magazine *Free Inquiry*, where he makes a sustained (if unoriginal) case against the historicity of the Book of Mormon and against Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling. “In spite of all the evidence to the contrary,” he lamented there, “faithful Mormons still accept Joseph Smith’s ‘translations’ from the Egyptian as literally ‘true’. . . . Feeling is placed over evidence, spirit over science, and faith over history.”

100 Linda Sillitoe and Allen D. Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 329. (Note the publisher. In this case, too, Signature Books apparently threatened no lawsuits.) See also Naifeh and Smith, *The Mormon Murders*, 201-2, 211; Robert Lindsay, *A Gathering of Saints: A True Story of Money, Murder and Deceit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 173. In a letter (*Utah County Journal*, 6 September 1991; *Provo Daily Herald*, 10 September 1991), Matthew Roper pointed out that “one of Signature Books’ own publications provides a characterization of George D. Smith as ‘anti-Mormon.’” Gary J. Bergera, responding for Signature (*Provo Daily Herald*, 8 October 1991), countered that the book in question was only passing on someone else’s opinion, which was presumably not that of the book itself or of its publisher. *RBBM* 3 (1991): vi, speaking on behalf of both its editor and its publisher, also disclaimed responsibility for, or necessary agreement with, the opinions contained within its pages (among which was the opinion that Signature betrays anti-Mormon leanings). Bergera failed, however, to grant F.A.R.M.S. the same benefit of its comparable statement.

101 Smith, “Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon,” 20-31. A reprint of this article is discussed by Louis Midgley on pp. 5-12 of the present Review. See also Mr. Smith’s letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, published on 6 October 1991 (in Section 4, p. 16), in which he seems to complain that recent *Times* coverage of the Latter-day Saints has been insufficiently negative.

George D. Smith’s “anti-Mormon” proclivities can also be inferred from the backgrounds of some of the authors to whom he grants his patronage. Dan Vogel and Rodger I. Anderson seem to have little in common, at first glance. One appears to be something of a secular humanist, along the lines of Mr. Smith himself, while the other is a Protestant fundamentalist and a believer in biblical inerrancy. However, they do share a hostility to the traditional truth-claims of Mormonism that is nicely symbolized by their parallel relationships to the late Reverend Wesley P. Walters and the *Journal of Pastoral Practice*.

In a statement quoted by the *Provo Daily Herald* on 9 June 1991, Gary Bergera, identified as vice-president of Signature Books, responded to the F.A.R.M.S. review of Rodger I. Anderson’s *Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined*. “The book does not begin to approach anti-Mormon,” he said, failing to mention either its earlier incarnation as a series of articles in an anti-Mormon journal affiliated with Reverend Wesley P. Walters or the fact that it consists mainly of a reprint of the so-called affidavits from E. D. Howe’s 1834 *Mormonism Unvailed*, the godfather of most anti-Mormon books. “FARMS side-steps issues with name-calling and confusion.” And then, noting that Anderson’s book attacks Hugh Nibley, Bergera added that, “People in the scholarly community have known for some time that Nibley’s work is flawed, but it takes courage for a young author to state this publicly.”

What courage it took in Anderson’s case is, however, rather difficult to discern. After all, the Danites appear to be retired, and the Mormon History Association gave him an award. He lives in Bible-belt Oklahoma, rather than in Mormon Utah. (Whose idea was it to republish Anderson’s old articles—Anderson’s, or Signature’s?) And in the circles in which Anderson seems to move—which include not only the congenial folks at Signature Books but also the “Faith, Prayer & Tract League” of Grand Rapids, Michigan, for whom he has published an anti-Mormon work entitled *The

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103 Gary James Bergera and Ronald Priddis, *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985), 360-63, features sharp criticism of Professor Nibley, so it is perhaps not surprising that Mr. Bergera admires Mr. Anderson. (Ambrose Bierce’s *The Devil’s Dictionary* defines “admiration” as “our polite recognition of another’s resemblance to ourselves.”)
Bible and Mormonism—criticizing Hugh Nibley doesn’t seem a very risky thing to do.\textsuperscript{104}

The cover notes provided for his book by the people at Signature describe Anderson, rather coyly, as “a freelance writer specializing in nineteenth-century religions.” Again, we must wonder, what would constitute “deception” in the publishing or marketing of books? Does a publisher have any obligation to identify its authors properly? And, finally, in view of their ties to Wesley Walters and their easily documented publication history, is it really “untrue and grossly unfair”—let alone “absurd”—to think that Dan Vogel and Rodger Anderson and George D. Smith look like anti-Mormons?

That there is a recognizable Tendenz to many of the publications of Signature Books is perhaps witnessed to by the fact that the small bookstore run by the “career apostates” Jerald and Sandra Tanner carries a selection of them.\textsuperscript{105} This selection, as of late summer 1991, included both The Word of God and Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined. The August issue of their Salt Lake City Messenger praised Signature Books as having published “some very important works on Mormon history,” and included the company’s address for those interested in obtaining a catalog. In fact, on the last page of their newsletter Rodger I. Anderson’s Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined is actually offered for sale by mail order, along with Dan Vogel’s earlier volume on Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism.\textsuperscript{106} (Incidentally, although the same issue mentioned the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies at several places, the

\textsuperscript{104} Louis Midgley discusses The Bible and Mormonism, and cites it, on pp. 306-7 of his review. Was Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined really Rodger Anderson’s “first book,” or does The Bible and Mormonism merit that designation?

\textsuperscript{105} The quoted phrase derives from non-LDS historian Lawrence Foster’s article “Career Apostates: Reflections on the Works of Jerald and Sandra Tanner,” which appeared in Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 17 (Summer 1984): 35-60. The first line of his article reads as follows: “For more than two decades, Jerald and Sandra Tanner have devoted their lives to exposing and trying to destroy Mormonism.” They have, of course, now been at it for almost precisely three decades.

Tanners did not publish its address. They did, however, label the negative reviews by Professors Anderson, Midgley, and Robinson "vicious." Needless to say, no F.A.R.M.S. publications are sold at the Tanners' bookstore.

Whether so intended or not, Signature's publications are avidly embraced by the most hostile of overt anti-Mormons. The Summer 1990 newsletter of Michigan-based Gospel Truths Ministries devoted more than a page (of its total of four) to a highly laudatory review of Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined. And the virulently anti-Mormon Evangel, emitted by Utah Missions Incorporated (of Marlow, Oklahoma), has voluntarily promoted and carried advertisements for Anderson's Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined on more than one occasion, along with its other advertisements for such important scholarly resources as Mormonism: Shadow or Reality? (Tanner and Tanner), "Is Mormonism Christian?" (Fraser), The Mormon Mirage (Scott), The Mormon Illusion (McElveen), and the videotapes "Witnessing to Mormons," "The Mormon Dilemma," and "The God Makers." Anderson's book, says the Evangel, "is really dynamite." "Signature... has really done our cause a service in the publication of this

107 Joel B. Groat, "The Prophet Next Door," Heart & Mind (Summer 1990): 3-4. Groat's review quotes Dan Vogel's praise of Anderson's book, found on its back cover. But that is not the only revealing case of interrelationship, for it is Gospel Truths Ministries (also known as the Institute for Religious Research) that recently sent copies of Charles M. Larson's attack on the book of Abraham, examined by John Gee and Michael Rhodes in this volume of the Review, 93-126, to thousands of Latter-day Saint households. In September 1986, they distributed thousands of copies of Floyd McElveen's God's Word, Final, Infallible, and Forever (By the author, 1985) in much the same manner. That three-part volume contains not only the title piece but, separately paginated, reprints of two of Reverend McElveen's other treatises (The Mormon Illusion and From Mormon Illusion to God's Love).


109 The Evangel 38 (September 1991) actually features two such advertisements, on pp. 3 and 9. (For those not among the cognoscenti, let me say that, in my own fairly extensive experience of anti-Mormon writings, the Evangel is unparalleled for sheer, consistent, low-brow hostility.)

book. The September 1991 issue of Utah Missions' other tabloid, The Inner Circle (so named because it goes only to donors), was delighted with another of Signature's publications: "Many scholarly Mormons," gloated Robert McKay in an article entitled "Anti-Mormon Mormons," say things that would be appropriate on the pages of the Evangel. Although their utterances are often couched in language that is impenetrable to the average reader, and tend to have a testimony of the truthfulness of the Mormon church tacked on somewhere, the content of those utterances is no worse than the things we print. An example is a book entitled Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine. This compilation presents scholarly treatments of various subjects, which contain facts we love to present. . . . The areas where Mormon scholars, not only in this book, but in other books and in scholarly journals, affirm what anti-Mormons have been saying for years are numerous.112

Yes, We Have No Agenda

This is, however, not the only kind of thing that seems to indicate a distinct (if unacknowledged) agenda on the part of Signature Books that is hostile to many vital Latter-day Saint beliefs. One might also point to a steady drumbeat of publications including, but not limited to, Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism;113 Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon

112 The Inner Circle 8 (September 1991): 7. (Actually, "tacked on" testimonies are rare in Signature publications although, as will be discussed below, quasi-religious claims are not entirely foreign to them.) Fairly or unfairly, traditional anti-Mormons have eagerly welcomed several of Signature's publications. For instance, The Evangel 37 (December 1990): 2, published a summary of Richard S. Van Wagoner's Mormon Polygamy: A History (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989) that had previously appeared in the September 1990 Newsletter of southern California's "Ex-Mormons for Jesus."
Feminism;114 Early Mormonism and the Magic World View;115 Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism;116 Toward Understanding the New Testament;117 Paul Toscano’s transmogrified Mormon hymns; Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon (which features thanks given, among others, to Wesley P. Walters);118 Peculiar People: Mormons and Same-Sex Orientation;119 The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past;120 Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism (acknowledging the “kind advice and suggestions” of, inter alios, Wesley P. Walters);121 the ironically subtitled Brigham Young University: A House of

115 D. Michael Quinn, Early Mormonism and the Magic World View (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987). While Michael Quinn apparently remains a believer, this book was (and, to some extent, continues to be) a popular item in anti-Mormon literature and on anti-Mormon radio programs. “If you are honest and objective and read the works of LDS historians, such as Michael Quinn (Mormonism and the Magical World View) . . . you would not be a Mormon” (Matt Paulson, letter to Louis Midgley, 10 June 1992). Of course, it can easily be argued that such anti-Mormons misunderstand Quinn; I think they do.
119 Ron Schow, Wayne Schow, and Marybeth Raynes, Peculiar People: Mormons and Same-Sex Orientation (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991).
121 Vogel, Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism, vii. Reviewing this book in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 30 (March 1991): 127-30, I noted that “Vogel implicitly accuses Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery of massive historical falsification. His book is a carefully marshalled brief for the prosecution.” Such an approach may be a legacy of Vogel’s tutelage under Wesley Walters, of whom Marvin Hill once noted that, like the Tanners, he “always assume[s] that the worst motives influenced the Mormon prophet” (Hill, “The First Vision Controversy,” 43).
Faith;\textsuperscript{122} and Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology.\textsuperscript{123} B. H. Roberts’s Studies of the Book of Mormon, originally published by the University of Illinois Press, will issue from Signature in September 1992.\textsuperscript{124} (This collection of criticisms of the Book of Mormon has evidently long been a favorite of George D. Smith, who also financed much of its first publication.)\textsuperscript{125} It seemed only natural, at the conclusion of Bobbie Birleffi’s May 1987 PBS documentary, “The Mormons: Missionaries to the World”—probably the most one-sidedly negative documentary that I have ever watched on public television—to see an expression of gratitude to “The George D. Smith Fund.”

\textsuperscript{122} I am told by a source I trust that one of the co-authors, in conversation, described the subtitle as intended ironically. A revised edition of this book will soon be published as The Lord’s University: Inside BYU. Presumably this title, too, embodies a joke for the initiated.

\textsuperscript{123} Margaret Toscano and Paul Toscano, Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990).


\textsuperscript{125} See, for instance, pp. 7-8, n. 9, of Louis Midgley’s review in this volume; Everett L. Cooley, “Preface,” in Roberts, Studies of the Book of Mormon, viii.
I wish to make myself entirely clear at this point. Although every one of the titles listed immediately above, either in whole or in part, bears traces of a regularly discernible worldview that clashes in various ways, sometimes in vitally important ways, with traditional Latter-day Saint understandings of the gospel, I do not by any means intend to say that every one is wholly without value. Nor, contrary to a common complaint of Signature’s partisans in the recent dispute, do I wish or demand that they be censored or suppressed. And it should be pointed out that a substantial number of Signature’s efforts have been both significant and free of any evident agenda. Thomas Alexander’s biography of Wilford Woodruff fits in this class, as do several important journals (including Wilford Woodruff’s). Scott Faulring’s edition of Joseph Smith’s diaries and journals, Richard Poll’s collection of essays on History and Faith, such anthologies as The Essential Parley P. Pratt and subsequent volumes in the “Classics in Mormon Thought Series,” England and Clark’s poetry anthology, and a wealth of fiction—on the whole, these represent valuable

126 Thomas G. Alexander, Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991). Still, several well-known Latter-day Saint historians have commented upon the incompleteness of George D. Smith’s recent edition of William Clayton’s journal. Certain materials are simply omitted, which not only makes the resulting edition less than adequate as a scholarly resource but also gives passages on plural marriage and other controversial subjects—these are not omitted—disproportionate weight. There is disagreement as to whether the peculiarities of the edition (which include possible additions, as well as omissions) reflect someone’s tendentiousness (not necessarily entirely the editor’s) or simple carelessness. Vern Anderson’s hagiographic Associated Press article (Salt Lake Tribune, 22 July 1991) says that George D. Smith’s edition of Clayton’s journal “illustrate[s] his no-holds-barred attitude toward publishing.”


129 However, even in Signature’s fiction, a prominent authority on Latter-day Saint writing tells me, there is a persistent undercurrent of alienation or disaffection from the Church. Mentioning a recent novel from another publisher that he thought both very well done and “faith-
contributions to Latter-day Saint literature for which I am grateful. Furthermore, thanks to George D. Smith’s patronage, they have been well produced, elegantly and attractively bound. Still, with very few exceptions I think it fair to remark that even these books do not contradict the agenda or general worldview that the F.A.R.M.S. reviewers and I discern behind Signature’s editorial decisions. To the extent that Signature’s publications on Latter-day Saint history go beyond simple documentary materials like journals, they have tended to be either expressly revisionist (e.g., *The Word of God* and *Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined*) or else gently secularizing or naturalistic in approach.130

According to Signature’s July 1991 advertisement in *BYU Today*, “Contributors [to *The Word of God*] provide a variety of perspectives on the place of scripture in Latter-day Saint churches.” But Professor Robinson had recognized in Vogel’s collection only “variations on a single theme.” He was struck, in fact, by “the uniformity of perspective among the essays.”131 Professor Midgley had also identified a recognizable “bias.”132 “In putting together [his collection],” Midgley alleged, “Vogel seems to have intentionally selected papers that challenge the traditional understanding of revelation found within the Mormon canon. . . . [T]he essays included in his book are neither the most mature nor the most competently reasoned scholarship available on the Mormon canon. What distinguishes them is a distinct bias.”133 Professor Jackson, in his independently written review, notes the same thing: “Despite variations in style and approach,” he remarks, “I find a near unanimity of point of

promoting,” he remarked that it was “inconceivable” that it could have been published by Signature Books.

130 Incidentally, I do not necessarily see the “gently secularizing or naturalistic” approach as evil or without value, provided it be recognized for what it is and how it is limited. See David B. Honey and Daniel C. Peterson, “Advocacy and Inquiry in the Writing of Latter-day Saint History,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 31 (Spring 1991): 139-79; Huston Smith, “Postmodernism’s Impact on the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (Winter 1990): 653-70.


133 Ibid., 300, 311.
view on the fundamental issues, which undoubtedly provided
the major criterion by which the articles were selected."134

This book has an agenda, and it runs counter to
the aims of the Church. If Vogel's purpose had been
to examine LDS beliefs on the topic of scripture, he
could have chosen works that explore the issues from
a variety of perspectives. Instead, he seems to have
selected those that support his agenda of changing
how Latter-day Saints view their revelations. This
book is not an examination of the matter, it is a
promotional tract for Vogel's anti-scriptural, anti-
institutional, and ultimately anti-Mormon point of
view.135

Statements like these raise several important questions that
deserve careful consideration by all: What is an "agenda"? (I
would be interested to know how George D. Smith and
Signature Books would define the term.) What clues can be
used to recognize one? Do agendas help or hurt scholarship?
Can human beings do without them? Finding answers to these
questions may not be easy, but they seem to me to represent
crucial issues that cry out for attention.

There is, of course, nothing morally wrong with having an
agenda or a point of view. Certainly there is nothing illegal
about it. Deseret Books represents an unmistakable worldview,
and F.A.R.M.S. advocates several agendas, as well. The
puzzling thing for many of us who have observed Signature
Books over the years is the apparent reluctance on the part of at
least some of its principal figures to admit what seems obvious
to us, namely that Signature too has a none-too-obscure point of
view.136 In the telephone call that, for me, began the episode
under consideration here, my acquaintance at Signature Books
informed me that, while F.A.R.M.S. has a point of view,
Signature does not. At Signature, he said, people simply allow

135 Ibid., 22-23.
136 An acquaintance of mine, importantly and professionally
involved in the Utah book market, tells me that Signature Books has a
history of going to the media with perceived wrongs and injured principles,
which suggests to her that it is as much a crusade as a business. (In its ten-
plus years of operation, according to an article in the 22 July 1991 Salt
Lake Tribune, it has never made a profit.)
the facts to speak for themselves. But I deny that such scholarly transparency is even possible.137

We have seen that George D. Smith and Signature Books reject the title “anti-Mormon.”138 Many conservative Protestant critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also reject the title, declaring with varying degrees of plausibility that, while they despise Mormonism, they have nothing but love for the Mormon people. Are “anti-Mormons” mere mythical beasts, the stuff of persecution-fixated Latter-day Saint imaginations?139 If not, how would we recognize an “anti-Mormon” if we saw one? How would George D. Smith or Dan Vogel define the term?

“With Friends Like This . . .”

Nobody would suggest for a moment that George D. Smith and Dan Vogel fit the traditional “anti-Mormon” mold in all respects. There are a number of differences between them and the late “Dr.” Walter Martin, and between them and the Tanners. (Rodger Anderson, on the other hand, seems fairly conventional.) There is a vast gulf between Mr. Smith and Mr. Vogel and, say, J. Edward Decker’s Luciferian theories.140 In the past, anti-Mormon attacks almost invariably came from outside the Church; for the most part, they still do. For the first time since the Godbeite movement, however, we may today be dealing with a more-or-less organized “anti-Mormon” movement within the Church.141 With “anti-Mormon Mormons,” as

141 The Godbeites, whose existence in Utah extended from 1868 to roughly 1880, offer a number of potential parallels to certain contemporary developments. A small group of disaffected Mormon businessmen and
Robert McKay puts it. This, again, raises a number of interesting questions.

But, first, an illustration. I have already mentioned Michael Barrett’s letter in the *Salt Lake Tribune* for 12 August 1991. In it, he characterized himself as “an active Mormon and former missionary.” Just a few days after that letter’s appearance, the July-August 1991 issue of *The Evangel* arrived. There, on page four, was yet another Barrett letter. Once again, he identified himself as “an active Mormon, and former missionary.” And this was not the first time that Mr. Barrett, of Sterling, Virginia, had appeared in the hard-core anti-Mormon pages of *The Evangel*. In December of 1989, a letter from this same Michael Barrett—introduced by the tabloid’s then-editor, Reverend John L. Smith, as “a faithful reader of our publication”—occupied much of the front page of *The Evangel*. Describing himself (in what appears to be, for him, almost a ritualistic incantation) as “a ‘temple Mormon,’ a returned Mormon missionary and secretary in [his] high priests quorum . . . [and] an active Mormon,” Mr. Barrett had then proceeded for two newspaper columns to list alleged contradictions of Mormonism, both internal and with the scriptures. The book of Abraham, he further wrote, “has been discredited as a completely incorrect translation,” and the Book of Mormon “is supported by very little, if any, archaeological proof.” The prophets of the Church have taught false doctrine, and even lied. Finally, he concluded with a paragraph very much like his later defense of George D. Smith:

All the confusion in the minds of some Mormons about the facts is unfortunate, but it is not really their fault. They have been misinformed by teachers and priesthood leaders who have been instructed by church leaders to conceal embarrassing facts. Such facts are referred to as “advanced history” and we have been warned not to release them.

intellectuals, they objected to the social views of the Church, disdained its priesthood hierarchy, rejected Mormon particularism, and, jettisoning both Latter-day Saint doctrine and practice, offered their own alternative religious vision. Eventually, having commenced as a social protest movement, they founded a short-lived church.
Some readers will no doubt be as puzzled as I am how such a person, holding such beliefs, continues to hold positions in the Church, or why he would desire to do so. It is inconceivable to me that an active and believing Latter-day Saint would give aid and comfort to a periodical that, on a monthly basis, ridicules Mormons and their beliefs, assaults their theology, republishes and rejoices in any newspaper account it can find of a Latter-day Saint caught in a crime—often, incidentally, finding the accused guilty even before a trial—campaigns regularly to have Mormons fired from their jobs solely because of their religion, doubts whether Mormons should be entrusted with public office, denies that Mormonism is Christian, and calls our leaders liars.142

“Dances with Wolves”?

Without attempting to judge him or Signature Books, we must say that Mr. Barrett’s case raises a number of interesting questions. Should we be concerned about the possibility of unwholesome opinions, even enemies, within the Church? Jesus certainly seemed to think that internal enemies were a possibility. “Beware of false prophets,” he said, “which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Matthew 7:15). Paul agreed, telling the elders of the church at Ephesus that “of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:30). One of the primary meanings of the Greek term *apostasia* is revolution or rebellion from within.143 So the possibility of enemies among the membership of the Church seems established. But that still leaves open other important questions. How are we to detect such enemies? Would we know it if we, ourselves, were among them? How, if they have been located, should we deal with them? What should we say to and about them? (Normally, the proper action would be to go to the brother or sister in private, but that seems inadequate where

142 Another article by Mr. Barrett showed up in The Evangel for October 1991, on p. 8. The Evangel, it is true, habitually terms Signature Books “pro-Mormon.” But then, from their perspective, anyone more gentle on the Latter-day Saints than Lilburn W. Boggs is probably suspect.

problematic statements have been published [D&C 42:88-92].) Such issues merit discussion. A courtroom, however, hardly seems the ideal place for a seminar.

La Trahison des Clercs

In a letter printed in the *Provo Daily Herald* on 11 September 1991, Bill Russell, of the Reorganized Church’s Graceland College, denounced “the juvenile name-calling that some who claim to be scholars engage in as a substitute for responsible debate.” Clearly, this was aimed at the F.A.R.M.S. reviewers. (Perhaps it was intended as a specimen of responsible scholarly debating.) A contributor to Vogel’s *The Word of God*, Mr. Russell then turned to a defense of himself and some of his RLDS colleagues in the volume against the alleged charge that they are “hostile to their church.”

Russell’s defense is based on the high positions that he and his colleagues have held in the RLDS hierarchy and at Graceland. “Are these authors,” he asks, “bent on the destruction of the RLDS Church?” And, certainly, the question seems silly on its face. After all, one of Mr. Russell’s colleagues in the book is currently president of the RLDS Council of Twelve Apostles. Another has been RLDS church historian for nearly three decades. A third was once the church’s statistician, and Russell himself has taught at the church’s college for more than a quarter of a century. “I preach frequently in our congregations and have been appointed by the [RLDS] First Presidency to several World Church committees.” Manifestly, such men have invested much of themselves in their institutional church. But all this is irrelevant to any position ever advanced by the F.A.R.M.S. reviewers, who never claimed that the RLDS authors in Vogel’s book were “hostile to their church.” Indeed, the reviewers would have been foolish to have done so, for, since Bill Russell and his ideological kin currently dominate the leadership of the RLDS church, it would probably be far more accurate to maintain that, as things stand, they are very fond of it.

I say he defends some of his RLDS colleagues because he clearly does not defend all. He identifies four of the essays in the book as having been “written by RLDS authors,” and, accordingly, he defends himself, Geoffrey Spencer, Richard Howard, and James Lancaster. Once again, though, we see in defenders of the book a strange inability to count. There are actually five essays in the book “written by RLDS authors,” not four. Nothing is said about A. Bruce Lindgren. Why?
What the F.A.R.M.S. reviewers said, rather, was that several, if not most or all of the contributors to *The Word of God* were hostile to centrally important beliefs of the Latter-day Saint Church. This is a very different proposition. Stephen Robinson had termed Dan Vogel's book part of Signature's "continuing assault upon traditional Mormonism"—a judgment in which I entirely concur. He said that "almost every chapter of the work is an indictment of the traditional beliefs of the Saints," and described it as "a propaganda piece arguing for what in the view of the authors Mormonism ought to become." "Practically every essay calls for a 'reinterpretation of traditional Mormon beliefs along the lines of contemporary scholarship or of liberal Protestant theology. Vogel and his associates present these proposed modifications as necessary to the continued viability and health of Mormonism (p. 41), and he enlists the aid of at least five RLDS scholars and clerics who have already helped to 'correct' the views of that denomination."  

Professor Midgley, too, thought it obvious that Dan Vogel "desires to promote and legitimize something very much like the ideology that has stressed and altered the RLDS community since the 1960s."  

Russell implicitly admits to a program when he notes that "all four of us [RLDS contributors] do think that some rethinking of our traditions is needed." But he tries to down-play the radical character of that rethinking. After all, he argues, doesn't every reflective soul believe that some rethinking is necessary? "I would like to meet a living, breathing, thinking human being who doesn't think that about her or his church." But this "rethinking," as advocated by Russell and his associates, has included such matters, among many others, as removing the sections of the *Doctrine and Covenants* that speak of baptism for the dead, denying the idea of an apostasy and the consequent need for a restoration, challenging the view that Joseph Smith restored ancient Christian truths and institutions, deemphasizing the doctrine of the gathering of Israel, downplaying emphasis on the second coming of Christ, ordaining women to the priesthood, and laying down educational requirements for ordination. There is even a move underway to change the church's name from the "Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints" to

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"Christ’s Church of Peace." The RLDS view of the nature of God is like that of the neoPlatonists [sic],” observes the prominent RLDS writer Paul Edwards. "God is the one unity, the good, yet above thought... The RLDS position acknowledges that the immaterial substance called God is personal." (In telling the story of Joseph Smith’s First Vision, the current multimedia presentation at the RLDS Visitors Center in Nauvoo, Illinois, says merely that, in the Grove, Joseph “sensed God’s call.”)

**Newthink**

Is there a difference between “rethinking” and “redefining”? Between “rethinking” and “replacing”? If there is a difference, can the use of one term when the other would be more appropriate be misleading? Only four days after the publication of Russell’s letter, an article appeared in the *Utah County Journal* that gives some idea of just what “rethinking” has meant in one specific region of the RLDS church.

One Sunday last April, Armand Wijckmans went to open his chapel for Sunday services and found the locks had been changed. As he was the Presiding Elder of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints’ Orem congregation, this was something of a surprise to Wijckmans, although he knew the reason. A few days earlier, says Wijckmans, he had been reprimanded by his District President Sid Troyer for organizing a regional Book of Mormon day. Wijckmans relates that he was instructed in no uncertain terms to stop emphasizing the Book of Mormon in his worship meetings, and furthermore “that I was not to mention Joseph Smith’s name ever again over the pulpit.” Wijckmans

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147 See the two articles by Peggy Fletcher Stack in the *Salt Lake Tribune* for 25 April 1992: “Reorganized LDS Church Embarks on Move Away from Mormon Roots” and “RLDS Theological Changes Favor Protestant Tenets.” As to the proposed name change, Stack’s opening lines are insightful: “What’s in a name? Only identity, memory and history.”

refused to comply and was removed as pastor following his lock-out.149

The official action taken against Pastor Wijckmans is known as “silencing.” It removes an individual from the RLDS priesthood and denies him or her the privilege of addressing any RLDS congregation. And, in this case, it cost the offender his paying job. (Wijckman’s sins, be it recalled, were emphasizing the Book of Mormon, hosting a Book of Mormon day that featured a F.A.R.M.S. speaker, and continuing to mention Joseph Smith over the pulpit.) The Journal article went on to relate that “RLDS faithful who have been dismayed by the direction church ideology was taking, have left their congregations in droves and formed restoration or independent branches throughout the U.S. They remain on the membership rolls of the RLDS church but have little contact with church leadership.” According to the estimate of one prominent leader of the “restorationists,” “one-third of the RLDS world membership loyally follows President Wallace B. Smith, a third has fled to join the restoration movement, and the remaining third is either inactive or uncertain which group to follow.”

Such is the “rethinking” of the liberals who have gained control of the RLDS church. Bill Russell cannot conceivably be unaware of it. Obviously, of course, the unpleasant consequences of a point of view do not, in and of themselves, prove it mistaken. The truth is occasionally regrettable. David Hume gave this memorable expression when he noted:

There is no method of reasoning more common, and yet none more blameable, than, in philosophical disputes, to endeavour the refutation of any hypothesis, by a pretence of its dangerous consequences to religion and morality. When any opinion leads to absurdities, it is certainly false; but it is not certain that an opinion is false, because it is of dangerous consequence. Such topics, therefore, ought entirely to be forborne; as serving nothing to


the discovery of truth, but only to make the person of
an antagonist odious.\textsuperscript{150}

But surely people being invited to travel a certain road have a
right to ask of their would-be guide where that road will likely
take them. And if he knows the answer, as he should, he has an
obligation to tell them. Thus, it seems to me, the ringing
declaration of Stephen Robinson in his review of Dan Vogel's
\textit{The Word of God} is also relevant in the case of Vogel’s
contributor and defender, Bill Russell: “It is dishonest to pass
off a rejection and a denial of [the religion restored through
Joseph Smith] as merely a ‘reinterpretation.’”\textsuperscript{151}

Robinson alleges that “the whole point of [Vogel’s] book is
that Latter-day Saints must bow to the authority of scholars. For
the Church of the Scholars is no less authoritarian than the
traditional faith. It merely seeks to subject its believers to a more
rational authority—to replace the ‘tyranny’ of the Brethren with
the tyranny of the intellectuals.”\textsuperscript{152} (Pastor Wijkmans’s expe-
rience would seem to bear this out.) Louis Midgley, too, saw
evidence of a “revisionist orthodoxy” in the book, and even of an
attempt at “dissonance management” when the evidence seemed
to challenge that orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{153}

Were the F.A.R.M.S. reviewers imagining things when
they recognized an occasional quasi-religious element in Vogel’s
book? I think not. After a tour of “Joseph Smith’s Scriptural
Cosmology,” for example, in which they believe they have
explained how the Prophet built his beliefs from scraps of folk
notions and outdated science, Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe
pitch themselves a softball question: “Where does this leave
inspiration and revelation? Where they have always been: in the
realm of subjective judgment. ... When we realize that there is
no empirical evidence either for or against scriptural inspiration,
we begin to avail ourselves of a more sensitive, responsible
scholarship as well as a more honest faith.”\textsuperscript{154} But this is not

\begin{itemize}
  \item Hume, \textit{An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding}, Sect.
  VIII, Part II.
  \item Robinson, review of Vogel, \textit{The Word of God}, 318.
  \item Ibid., 315-16.
  \item Vogel and Metcalfe, “Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Cosmology,”
in Vogel, \textit{The Word of God}, 211-12. The late Joseph Campbell, in many
of his writings, offered the view that religion is simply metaphor,
mistakenly understood as literally factual. Mortimer J. Adler, \textit{Truth in}
how things have “always been.” A radical novelty has been introduced here which, if accepted, would utterly transform Latter-day Saint belief. If there can in principle be no empirical evidence either for or against revelation—as opposed to the practical question of whether there is actually enough evidence available to draw a firm conclusion one way or the other—it can only be because the revelation has no contact with empirical reality. But to make such an assumption about the scriptures of the Abrahamic traditions is already to deny their most centrally important claims. It is to label their “truth” at best poetic, rather than factual. It is to reduce religious allegiance to the same level as preferences in cuisine, fashion, manners, and social customs. To do so, and then at the same time to deny that one has done anything important, is to be either unconscious or disingenuous (putting it mildly), or both.

Listen, further, to Mark Thomas, also writing in *The Word of God*:

Book of Mormon scholarship of the future will be different from that of the past. Its apologetic past has made it a defense of faith. But its interpretive nature...

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*Religion* (New York: Collier, 1990), offers a trenchant critique of Campbell’s position.

In his two important works *Tahāṣūt al-Falāṣīfa* (“The Incoherence of the Philosophers”) and *al-Munqīdhi min al-Dalālī* (“The Deliverer from Error”), the great Islamic philosophical theologian al-Ghazâlî (d. A.D. 1111) pronounced advocates of the doctrine of the eternity of the world to be non-Muslims—a move he did not take lightly—precisely because they seemed to make the existence or non-existence of God irrelevant to empirical reality. In the modern West, Matthew Arnold is prominently associated with the idea that the truth of religion is poetic, and not factual. His poem “Dover Beach” offers a glimpse of his own loss of faith.

Matthew Roper, in a letter published in the *Utah County Journal*, 6 September 1991, and the *Provo Daily Herald*, 10 September 1991, implicitly charged Signature Books with lack of candor because, he said, one of the contributors to Vogel’s book “has publicly described himself as an atheist.” Responding for Signature Books in the *Provo Daily Herald*, 8 October 1991, Gary Bergera denied Roper’s claim. The problem may lie in the word “publicly.” One contributor to *The Word of God* has termed himself “an atheist” (or, alternatively, an “agnostic”) in personal conversation with me and others. Yet, remarkably, his public essay is laden with religious language.
in the future will give it power to mold and modify faith. I personally hope that Book of Mormon scholarship can mold a purer faith and a nobler Mormonism. I believe that a spiritual trek is at hand for Mormonism and that the scholar’s word will be one of those guiding the church’s future.157

To me, the most obvious flaw in such imaginings is that every proposed alternative to the restored gospel—whether it be the redefined “Mormonism” of Dan Vogel and some of his associates, or the fundamentalist Protestantism of more conventional anti-Mormons—is that it would be less, not more, satisfying than what I already possess. I am reminded of the remark of Mirā Bāī (ca. 1504), one of India’s greatest saints, when she was confronted with a similar offer. “I have felt the swaying of the elephant’s shoulders,” she said, “and now you want me to climb on a jackass? Try to be serious.”158 “Most Latter-day Saints,” Kent Jackson comments, “are not presumptuous enough to hope for a ‘purer’ and ‘nobler’ faith than what God has already revealed. . . . [And] we should not forget that such a trek happened once before, when intellectuals became more popular than apostles and prophets and transformed the Early Christian Church into the misdirected Christianity of the Middle Ages.”159 Jackson says of ex-Mormon Vogel that he has evidently “found his new faith . . . in the religion of secular scholarship.”160 Steven Epperson also seems to have noticed a strangely ersatz-religious element in Vogel’s anthology. “The reader,” he remarked in a review of the book for BYU Studies, “sorely misses a sense of circumspection, of measure, even of skepticism and an awareness of the tentative and provisional, that would, in more able hands, qualify dogmatic propositions about the context and interpretation of God’s word as mediated through his human agents.”161

Since this tendency of intellectuals to set themselves up as rivals of (or improvers upon) the prophets is abundantly attested

158 I thank Professor Huston Smith for bringing this passage from Mirā Bāī to my attention.
159 Jackson, “How Not to Read the Scriptures,” 8.
160 Ibid., 22.
161 Epperson, review of Vogel, The Word of God, 70. Epperson’s review, it should be noted, is largely negative.
in the history of religions, I cannot see how it is “absurd” or insulting to discuss it in the context of Mormonism. Indeed, for the future health of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, vigilant attention to the issue is, I think, indispensable.

Horizons

“One of [Peterson’s] reviewers,” George D. Smith wrote in his response to me, “questioned the religious devotion of the scholars who contributed to The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture in part because he felt they did not endorse the view that ‘genuine faith’ includes ‘belief that contradicts the evidence.’” He seems to want his readers to recoil in astonishment at so silly and anti-intellectual a claim. But it is not clear to me that the claim is either silly or anti-intellectual. Nor is it obvious to me that, in the classic, millennia-old debate over the relationship between faith and reason, Mr. Smith holds the One Obviously True Position. The reviewer in question is Stephen E. Robinson, and the passage to which Mr. Smith objects reads, more fully, as follows:

The problem with scholarly religion, religion that has been carefully trimmed so that it conflicts with no empirical data, is that it inevitably makes scholarship the religion. . . . In the Church of the Scholars religion can make no claim unsupported by or contradicted by empirical evidence (“ye cannot know of things which ye do not see,” Alma 30:15). But in what sense can this be called religion at all? As both the scriptures and the philosophers know, genuine faith is belief in the absence of evidence or even belief

162 The Latter-day Saint notion of the apostasy, as it is conceived by more sophisticated thinkers, usually involves among other things a supplanting of divine revelation by Hellenized “reason.” A very similar but far less well-known process took place in Islam. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974), 1:410-43, sketches brilliantly the conflict between “Abrahamic” and “Socratic” pieties in the Muslim context. Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, in their brief book on God’s Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), show how the ‘ulamā’, the scholars, seized control—a much more deliberate process than merely “stepping into it”—of the vacuum left at the death of Muhammad.
that contradicts the evidence. The Church of the Scholars is not a faith at all, but merely intellectual acquiescence to the prevailing scholarly winds. The Word of God proposes the ultimate oxymoron—empirical religion, a faith-less faith.163

Professor Robinson is correct when he reports the scriptural teaching to be that “genuine faith is belief in the absence of evidence or even belief that contradicts the evidence.” “Let no man deceive himself,” wrote Paul. “If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” (1 Corinthians 3:18-19). “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). As every reader of the Bible should know, “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1; compare Ether 12:6). “Faith,” Alma taught the impoverished Zoramites, “is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true” (Alma 32:21). In this life, “we walk by faith, not by sight” (1 Corinthians 5:7). This is a truth recognized by most, if not all, serious religious thinkers. “Philosophical theology,” says Mortimer Adler, “may carry one’s mind to the edge of religious belief, but that is the near edge of a chasm that can only be crossed to the far edge by a leap of faith that transcends reason.”164 And salvation is to be obtained only on the chasm’s far side. God removed the sins of Enos in the Book of Mormon “because of [his] faith in Christ, whom [he had] never before heard nor seen” (Enos 1:8). When the brother of Jared saw the pre-mortal Savior, “he had faith no longer, for he knew, nothing doubting” (Ether 3:19). “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

But can faith sometimes actually contradict the available evidence? Certainly it can. And, often, it should. Apart from human questions, concerns, and interpretations, “evidence,” as

164 Adler, Truth in Religion, 92.
such, does not exist. Its recognition depends upon human minds. Its marshalling into arguments is inevitably the act of human personalities that may or may not be stable or disinterested or competent, personalities inescapably immersed in the assumptions of a given time and place. What counts as relevant data and conclusive reasoning varies, within limits, according to many factors, including cultural prejudice and personal psychology. This is true even of fields like mathematics and logic, to say nothing of areas less susceptible to definitive demonstration like philosophy, religion, and history. It is only with great care and with appropriate humility that we should identify and weigh the data on the most important questions. In Shakespeare's great play, part of Othello's problem is that, confronted with apparent "evidence," he surrenders his intuitively certain knowledge of Desdemona's character. Tragically, he learns only too late that the "evidence" had misrepresented reality, and that Iago, the "friend" who had simply put the "facts" together and let them speak for themselves, was neither unbiased nor honest. Thus, under certain circumstances it may be rational and entirely right to believe against the seeming "evidence."

If we wish to determine the character and limits of "genuine religious faith," one obvious way to do so is to investigate the character of "faith" in its historic manifestations. This is relatively easy. The great Latin Aristotelians of medieval Europe, for instance, provide an interesting illustration of the issues involved when "reason" and "revelation" seem to conflict. (They are especially useful since they represent the intellectual leaders of what has been called "the Age of Faith" par excellence.) Thoroughly devoted to the writings of Aristotle and his great Arab commentator Averroës (Ibn Rushd; d. A.D. 1198), these philosophers regarded the Aristotelian arguments for the eternity of the world and against personal immortality as

165 Honey and Peterson, "Advocacy and Inquiry in the Writing of Latter-day Saint History," 139-79.
166 For human factors in mathematical logic, see William Barrett, The Illusion of Technique: A Search for Meaning in a Technological Civilization (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1979), 3-117.
logically irrefutable. Yet, as Christians, they felt they must affirm both the createdness of the world, its creatureliness and contingency, and the certainty of human survival beyond death. This placed medieval Christianity in direct contradiction to the most sophisticated and respectable thinking of the day. How did these thinkers deal with the conflict? They simply affirmed the superior truth of Christianity. "Although we have reached this conclusion by the method of Aristotle and the Commentator," they would say of a particular doctrine, "nonetheless faith and truth declare otherwise."

The case of the medieval scholastics is interesting partly because, although they were committed to the claims of "reason" to a degree that makes our own ill-educated and sentimental era seem flabby by contrast, they nonetheless provide a clear instance of the assertion of faith in the face of prestigious and strongly contradictory "evidence." But they are interesting for another reason, too. As it turns out, when they refused to yield up their religious beliefs to the demands of Aristotle and Averroës they were right. St. Thomas Aquinas (d. A.D. 1274), in a synthesis that gained immense influence only after his death, was able to show that Christian belief as understood by medieval theologians could be reconciled with Greek philosophy. More importantly, however, the indisputably certain truths of Aristotelianism have lost their impregnability and most of their prestige since the Middle Ages. Where once Aristotle represented the ultimate in scientific certitude, the most unassailable of evidence, few today find his arguments for the eternity of the world or the unlikelihood of personal immortality compelling.

Scriptural faith must sometimes go beyond the apparent evidence. "Ye receive no witness," wrote Moroni, "until after the trial of your faith" (Ether 12:6). Job, for instance, had abundant reason to doubt the goodness of God, but declared, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15). This is the same faith that millions of devout Christians and Jews have felt when, against all the evidence of wars and concentration camps and sickness and injustice and premature death, they have nonetheless affirmed the existence of a benevolent God. When Peter began to sink into the Sea of Galilee, the Savior not only caught him by the hand but rebuked him: "O thou of little faith,

168 On Latin Averroism, as it is called, see Étienne Gilson, History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages (New York: Random House, 1955).
wherefore didst thou doubt?” (Matthew 14:31). But Peter had good reason for doubt. People simply do not walk on water; the evidence is, overwhelmingly, against it. So, too, Abraham, “the father of the faithful,” acted not only against his general beliefs but against the specific earlier promises of God when asked to do so by divine revelation: “By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son” (Hebrews 11:17). And how many believers in the resurrection have actually seen a dead human body arise from the grave, alive again? Nevertheless, said the great Latin father Tertullian (d. ca. A.D. 220), “the Son of God died; it is necessarily to be believed, because it is absurd [ineptum]. And he was buried, and rose again; it is certain because it is impossible [certum est quia impossibile est].”

David Hume knew that even our confidence that the sun will rise tomorrow, strictly speaking, exceeds our evidence. How much more doubtful, therefore, must seem the propositions of theology, so far removed from the commonplace realities of daily experience. Some writers, like the illustrious French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, have made much of the fact that the claims of religion routinely exceed “common sense,” “received wisdom,” and universally accepted “evidence.” “Who then,” Pascal demanded, “will blame Christians for not being able to give a reason for their belief, since they profess a religion for which they cannot give a reason? They declare, in expounding it to the world, that it is a foolishness, stultitiam [1 Corinthians 1:21]; and then you complain that they do not prove it!” Pascal took a far bleaker view of the evidence for faith than do most Latter-day Saints, who expect the gospel to be sustained by both intellectual and spiritual data. Few Mormons would concede that the preponderance of evidence is against their faith. Most would probably insist that the situation is exactly the opposite, although they might acknowledge a few issues where, at the worst, the key evidence is insufficient and contradictory. But George D. Smith would be presumptuous indeed to dismiss even the rather

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169 Tertullian, De Carne Christi 5.
170 Hume’s famous attack on causality and on the limitations of inference from regularly occurring phenomena is to be found in An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748).
171 F.A.R.M.S. itself is evidence that Latter-day Saints are not irrationalists.
extreme position of Pascal as silly and anti-intellectual: “A game,” as the great French thinker famously wrote,

is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can do neither the one thing nor the other; according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions. Do not, then, reprove for error those who have made a choice; for you know nothing about it. “No, but I blame them for having made, not this choice, but a choice; for again both he who chooses heads and he who chooses tails are equally at fault, they are both in the wrong. The true course is not to wager at all.” Yes, but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked.172

True religion, therefore, has always involved something of a Kierkegaardian “leap of faith.” “If we must not act save on a certainty,” Pascal continued, “we ought not to act on religion, for it is not certain. But how many things we do on an uncertainty, sea voyages, battles! I say then we must do nothing at all, for nothing is certain.”173 “But, after all,” wrote Tertullian, “you will not be ‘wise’ unless you become a ‘fool’ to the world by believing ‘the foolish things of God.’ ”174 Such a view is, of course, easy to caricature as sheer gullibility. And it can obviously become that. But genuine religion inevitably must include an element of faith beyond and even against the seeming evidence. Otherwise, we have the situation of C. S. Lewis’s “dwarfs” in the last book of the Chronicles of Narnia—imprisoned in a captivity of their own making, and “so afraid of being taken in that they can not be taken out.”175

George D. Smith rejects faith that transcends or opposes apparent “evidence.” He claims that Professor Robinson is critical of Signature’s writers because they too reject such faith.

Although Peterson did not elaborate, one of his reviewers questioned the religious devotion of the

172 Blaise Pascal, Pensées, III.233. The translation is that of W. F. Trotter, available from various publishers.
173 Ibid., III.234.
174 Tertullian, De Carne Christi 5.
scholars who contributed to *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* in part because he felt they did not endorse the view that "genuine faith" includes "belief that contradicts the evidence." The FARMS reviewer then labeled these scholars as "non-Latter-day Saints, Reorganized Latter-day Saints, disaffected Latter-day Saints, and hard-core anti-Latter-day Saints."

Not only, it is implied, is Robinson's definition of "genuine faith" preposterous and anti-intellectual, but that definition undergirds Robinson's labeling of the contributors to *The Word of God* as "anti-Mormons." Clearly, the implicit argument seems to continue, any label based on so silly a definition must itself be silly and anti-intellectual. (One detects, here, the aroma of Edward Ashment's repeated contention that believing Latter-day Saints are desperate irrationalists.) We have seen, however, that Professor Robinson's definition of "genuine faith" is neither silly nor anti-intellectual. One need not be a pure empiricist, or a materialist, to be rational. (Thomas Aquinas, the illustrious medieval monk and philosopher, was one of the most rational people who ever lived.) In fact, our purest rational intellectual discipline, mathematics, is based on notions like dimensionless points and widthless lines—and, indeed, numbers themselves—that have no genuine material existence and will never be empirically discerned. Thus, even if it rejected empirical data (which it emphatically does not), Latter-day Saint belief could still conceivably be highly indeed preeminently, rational. Furthermore, as I have noted here, and as readers of his review can easily discover for themselves, Robinson lists many reasons for his labels besides the contributors' alleged insistence on limiting religion to that which can be empirically proven.

176 The word "then" in the second sentence implies that the labels of which it speaks followed closely after the comment on "genuine faith" mentioned in the first, and that there is some purported logical connection between them. However, the definition and the labels do not occur on the same page, nor even on adjacent pages. (Robinson, review of Vogel, *The Word of God*, 316, 318.)
The Geography of Assumed Positions

In the opinion of certain critics of the Church, Latter-day Saints take refuge in irrationalism because the evidence is overwhelmingly against them and their beliefs. Some, like Edward Ashment and George D. Smith, assert this openly and even aggressively. Others are less direct. In a letter appearing in the *Provo Daily Herald* on 25 August 1991, Brent Lee Metcalfe, one of the contributors to Dan Vogel’s *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, professed himself “perplexed” by my own earlier letter. The major reason for his perplexity was evidently geographical.

Peterson’s criteria for identifying agendas “hostile” to central Mormon beliefs is [*sic*] fraught with ambiguity. One important aspect of Mormon theology is the idea that contemporary native Americans are directly descended from the ancient Jews. Yet former FARMS official John L. Sorenson has insisted that “either the Book of Mormon promised land was in some portion of Mesoamerica or it was nowhere,” thus seriously questioning the reliability of Joseph Smith’s own statements. Sorenson’s views, circulated by FARMS, contradict over 150 years of Mormon tradition. For consistency’s sake, would Peterson also concede that FARMS’s agenda is “hostile to centrally important beliefs of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints”? I doubt it. Perhaps Peterson should allow the same latitude for other scholars he grants his colleagues.

But now it was my turn to be “perplexed.” Is Brent Metcalfe really stepping forward here to defend the “traditional” view of Book of Mormon geography? Almost certainly not. Unless I am seriously mistaken, Metcalfe holds that the events of the Book of Mormon are purely imaginary, and thus that there simply is not and cannot be a true Book of Mormon geography. The search for a real world correlate to the Book of Mormon’s

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177 Note Mr. Smith’s opposition of “history written to express and support religious faith” to “history that attempts to be faithful to the past”—as if they were mutually exclusive. George D. Smith, “Editor’s Introduction,” in Smith, *Faithful History*, vii.
Zarahemla is precisely as meaningful, in Metcalfe’s view, as a search for J. R. R. Tolkien’s Middle-earth. Surely, though, Brent Metcalfe cannot seriously argue that academic discussion about where Nephite history took place represents as brutal an assault on Latter-day Saint belief as denial that Nephite history took place at all. An analogy should make this entirely plain: There is a vast gulf between arguing whether the resurrection of Jesus occurred at the Garden Tomb or the Holy Sepulchre, and rejecting the resurrection altogether. One is a dispute among Christian believers, while the other is a dispute between believers and unbelievers. Notwithstanding Professor England’s equation of F.A.R.M.S. and Signature Books as “two ‘alternate voices,’” it seems transparently obvious here that some voices are more “alternate” than others.

There seems, thus, to be a large element of posturing in Metcalfe’s letter. But it is posturing with a purpose. For Mr. Metcalfe agrees with Dr. Sorenson and most serious Latter-day Saint students of the subject that the so-called “traditional” view of Book of Mormon geography—in which Nephite history covers most or all of North and South America—is untenable. Unlike them, however, he thinks—hopes?—that we are firmly bound to that probably indefensible position.178

As for Metcalfe’s finding my “criteria for identifying agendas ‘hostile’ to central Mormon beliefs . . . fraught with ambiguity,” I can perhaps offer a few hints that might help to clarify my meaning. First, one must identify what one means by “central Mormon beliefs.” (Not every fragment of folklore or priesthood quorum speculation qualifies.) Among these “central Mormon beliefs,” I suggest, would be such items as belief in God and Jesus Christ, belief that God communicated with Joseph Smith, belief in the authority of the priesthood, and the like. Belief in the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon should also, in my opinion, be featured among these “central Mormon beliefs.” (To argue otherwise appears to make nonsense of the basic narratives of the Restoration, including the visit of Moroni and the testimony of the witnesses to the Book

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178 For Professor Sorenson’s view of the “traditional” geography and the deference that faithful Latter-day Saints do or do not owe to it, see not only his important book An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985), but also, and especially, his The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1990).
of Mormon, and seriously weakens the claim of the Book of Mormon to be a second witness of Christ.) On the other hand, the specific geography of the Book of Mormon is established by no canonized revelation, and debates on it affect no vitally important issues in our theology. "It does not make any difference to us," said the First Presidency's Anthony W. Ivins in 1929. "There has never been anything yet set forth that definitely settles that question. So the Church says we are just waiting until we discover the truth." During the same general conference, Elder James E. Talmage agreed. "It does not matter to me just where this city or that camp was located," he remarked, although he encouraged further research and cautious speculation. In 1890, President George Q. Cannon warned against commitment to specific geographical theories in the absence of revelation, as have several other leaders of the Church since his time. Yet Church leaders have also acknowledged that "diligent, prayerful study" can yield further insight. Clearly, however, no specific theory of Book of Mormon geography represents a "central Mormon belief."

Once "central Mormon beliefs" have been identified, it is a relatively simple process to identify positions hostile to those beliefs. And, interestingly, various publications of Signature Books have indeed implicitly or explicitly questioned the proposition that God communicated with Joseph Smith, that an authoritative priesthood was restored to and through him, that Nephite history occurred in the real, empirical world, and many other beliefs that seem to me and others absolutely central to any meaningful Latter-day Saint belief. One would, in fact, have to look long and hard for any Signature materials that, explicitly or implicitly, present Mormonism as something through which the presence of God is manifested. And so arises a question of fundamental importance: If, as certain Signature publications seem to claim of Mormonism, every element of a purportedly revealed religion can be explained naturalistically, leaving no residue, does that religion provide any reason to affirm the existence of a God at all?

179 See Conference Report (5-7 April 1929): 16, 44.
181 The phrase is John A. Widtsoe's. See The Improvement Era 53 (July 1950): 547, 596-97.
Beyond the Center Ring

On 21 August 1991, I received that month’s issue of the Salt Lake City Messenger, the monthly publication of Jerald and Sandra Tanner’s Utah Lighthouse Ministry. It professed to be pleased by the fact that Latter-day scholars were finally paying some attention to them. As the Tanners put it, these Latter-day scholars “became so upset with our book . . . that they have published rebuttals.”182 “With the publication of our work on the ‘black hole’ . . . they apparently realized that it was time to speak up.”183 In other words, their work Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon was so devastating to us that we no longer dared remain silent.

“Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,” Hamlet advised Gertrude.184 The Review of Books on the Book of Mormon was intended from the beginning to be comprehensive, to cover all books published on the Book of Mormon, and it has been so described on several occasions.185 It was only for this reason, and not because we felt ourselves suddenly menaced by their scholarship, that we reviewed the Tanners’ book.186 After all, we had also reviewed Loftes Tryk’s The Best Kept Secrets

183 Ibid., 14.
184 William Shakespeare, Hamlet, act III, scene iv, line 145.
186 Ah, they will respond, but why “three reviews, containing seventy-five pages”? (The emphasis is in, and typical of, the original. See p. 12 of the anonymous “Response to ‘Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?’” [published in 1983 as item #6 in the Mormon Miscellaneous Response Series] on the Tanners’ “bizarre editorial style.”) The Tanners are manifestly impressed by the sheer bulk of the reviews, and by the number of reviewers. But this is not so unusual. F. Richard Hauck’s book received three reviews in the first volume (pp. 20-79). I follow no particular rule on these matters. To set the record completely straight on the issue at hand here, I originally asked two reviewers to look at the Tanners’ book. At the last minute, a third, unsolicited review arrived, which I happened to like. So I published it, as well. However, the Tanners will probably see the lengthy review appearing at pp. 169-215 of the present volume as evidence that I speak with forked tongue, and that there is indeed a new F.A.R.M.S. campaign against them. Why, otherwise, review a book published in 1987? But, again, the piece printed here was an unsolicited submission. I accepted it because I thought it made a number of important points, and because most contemporary anti-Mormon writers depend heavily upon the Tanners. Attending to the roots seemed an efficient way of dealing with the branches.
in the Book of Mormon, so they can hardly believe that showing up in the review certifies a book’s quality. They claimed to be so gratified by the attention they were receiving that they announced a sale on Covering Up the Black Hole: “Since Mormon scholars have publicly come out in opposition to it, we feel that this would be a good time to get it into the hands of as many people as possible.” But maybe the real idea was to make a sale on the old car before the wheels and doors fell off and the customer discovered what a lemon he was looking at. In any event, we still await and welcome a response—cogent or otherwise—from the Tanners. Or, for that matter, from Tryk.

And Now, the Present

We remain committed to the sometimes thankless task of trying to the best of our ability, with fairness, candor, and honesty, to review books on the Book of Mormon. As I have attempted (at excruciating length) to show, many important questions about this process remain for reflection. Still, I hope that our record suggests that we have been even-handed. We have criticized pro-Mormon books at least as often as we have criticized anti-Mormon books.187 Our reviewers have been entirely free to examine and question the books of those prominently associated with F.A.R.M.S.188 We have drawn upon a range of people, from many different places and backgrounds, to help us in this endeavor.

This year’s work has been no exception. It is, as they say, my pleasant obligation to thank the many people—among them Charles D. Bush, James H. Fleugel, Brent Hall, William J. Hamblin, Donald W. Parry, Deborah D. Peterson, Stephen D. Ricks, Matthew Roper, Melvin J. Thorne, and John W. Welch—who have contributed in one way or another to the emergence of this, the fourth volume of the Review of Books on the Book of Mormon. Once more, Andrew Teasdale did a fine job of bibliographical research. And, yet again, Shirley S. Ricks, in her capacity as Production Editor, plucked a volume of the Review


from the chaos that typically surrounds my literary efforts. Obviously, too, I owe a great debt to the reviewers, without whom even the chaos upon which Dr. Ricks exercised her abilities would not have existed.

We hope that the contents of this volume will generate further discussion. Indeed, we will be more heartened than horrified if the present Review sparks spirited debate. (Within bounds!) But I must point out that the opinions expressed in these reviews are not necessarily those of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (F.A.R.M.S.) or the editor—I strongly disagree with at least one of them, in fact—and that reviewers do not necessarily represent their employers or the institutions with which they are affiliated. Nor has any attempt been made to impose a harmony upon the reviewers. Furthermore, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies is an independent organization, the actions and opinions of which should not necessarily be assumed to represent the views or preferences of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or of Brigham Young University or of any other group or person.

Some abbreviations commonly used by Latter-day Saints and employed herein include DHC (Documentary History of the Church), JD (Journal of Discourses) and TPJS (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith).