Weldon Langfield, *The Truth about Mormonism: A Former Adherent Analyzes the LDS Faith*

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Reviewed by Matthew Roper

The cover to Weldon Langfield’s recent book is adorned with a crude sketch of the Salt Lake Temple covered halfway with sand. From the pile protrudes a small shovel, as if to say that here is a book that really buries Mormonism. “The explosive growth of the Mormon religion,” says the author, “would astound its early critics. The distinctive claims and outreach of that faith have touched millions. . . . Yet Mormonism is built upon and fraught with *blatant error*” (back cover; emphasis added). The book purports to be “a thorough expose of the Mormon faith” in which the author, a former member of the Reorganized Church, has drawn upon “both personal experience and exhaustive research,” in attempting to “present the fruit of decades of interest and study in the most concise and convincing manner possible” (p. 10).

Chapter 1 provides a brief discussion of Joseph Smith’s early life and the founding events of the Church. Langfield asserts that the accounts of the First Vision are “riddled with discrepancies and problems” (p. 14). Following Wesley Walters’s thesis, he complains that there was no religious revival in the Palmyra area in 1820. Because of this, “it is apparent” to Langfield “that the Mormon account of its origin begins with a gross fabrication” (pp. 14-15). This, however, is not apparent at all since Joseph Smith never claimed that the religious excitement was confined to 1820. 1820 was the year given for Joseph’s initial vision, but the religious excitement which had influenced him clearly occurred before that time. Joseph described this religious excitement as occurring “some time in the second year after our removal to Manchester” (Joseph Smith-History 1:5), in other words, sometime between 1819 and 1820. The Smiths moved to Manchester in 1818.1 Walters’s work is largely irrelevant in light of the works of more responsible

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1 Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 40.
historians, of whom Langfield seems to be unaware. Milton Backman has demonstrated that in the summer of 1819, Methodists held a significant conference in Vienna just a few miles from Joseph’s home. The meeting was attended by more than a hundred ministers of the Methodist faith, including the Reverend George Lane. Backman also provided evidence of substantial increases in church membership among Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist congregations in the regions surrounding Palmyra and Manchester.

Since Joseph Smith did not write the account of this revival until 1838, he might have learned about the extensive nature of this religious quickening months or years after the events occurred. Accounts of the enlivenments which occurred in New York in 1819 and 1820 were advertised in Palmyra, and the number of conversions occurring in the area east of Lake Cayuga and in the region of Albany was enumerated in the local newspaper, the Palmyra Register.

Joseph Smith’s Character

Langfield attempts to portray Joseph Smith as a disreputable character whose testimony regarding his visions and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon cannot be trusted. He asserts that Joseph Smith was found guilty of “being a disorderly person and an imposter” in the 1826 trial at Bainbridge, New York (p. 19). Earlier critics had sometimes

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3 Backman, Joseph Smith’s First Vision, 198.

asserted that the trial took place, but Mormon scholars were understandably skeptical, since the three previously known versions were contradictory on some essential details, such as who brought charges against Joseph, the nature of the charges, who testified, or whether there was a conviction at all. In 1971 Reverend Wesley Walters, a well-known anti-Mormon, discovered a bill of costs for an 1826 trial at Bainbridge, New York. The document described Joseph Smith as a “glass looker,” which, Walters asserted, proved that Joseph was convicted of deceit. Anti-Mormon critics Jerald and Sandra Tanner were quick to agree. While less renowned critics such as Langfield continue to rely upon the mistaken conclusions of Walters and the Tanners, recent research demonstrates that those conclusions were ill founded and that Joseph was acquitted of any crime.


6 The Pearsall account asserted that Joseph was found guilty, while A. W. Benton said that he was allowed to escape. W. D. Purple, who claimed to have kept notes at the trial, declared that Joseph was acquitted. Marvin S. Hill, “Joseph Smith and the 1826 Trial: New Evidence and New Difficulties,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 12 (Winter 1972): 226-30.

7 Walters visited the Chenango County jail in search of records on Joseph Smith. Chenango County Historian Mae Smith recalled, “He was not under constant supervision and the Sheriff Joseph Benenati and I learned later that Mr. Walters had taken with him the audits concerning Joseph Smith and possibly more. We were very upset and asked him to return them. He sent us copies but the County Lawyer, James Haynes, had to write him before we got them back. The records are in a secure place now. The last time Mr. Walters came here Sheriff Benenati told him to leave his office and not to return. It is against the law to take records to use for any reason without permission.” Mae Smith to Ronald Jackson, February 6, 1986, photocopy in reviewer’s possession.


The author quotes anti-Mormon writer E. D. Howe, who collected negative statements about the Smith family several years after Mormonism had become unpopular (pp. 19-22). But there are problems in accepting the Howe affidavits at face value. Richard Anderson has argued convincingly that the affidavits of Howe’s fifty-two residents of Palmyra and eleven residents of Manchester were probably penned by Hurlbut and do not represent an accurate portrayal of the Smith family or Joseph.11 Marvin Hill also notes,

If the Smiths were so reprehensible, why did the Presbyterian Church to which many of these witnesses belonged admit Lucy and her children to membership in 1824? There was nothing negative said about their character when they chose to leave the Church in 1828. William Smith was probably right when he said that his family did not learn that they were bad folks until after the Book of Mormon appeared.12

Moreover, the claims of these signers that the Smiths were “entirely destitute of moral character” does not stand up in light of statements by other former neighbors of the Smith family who describe them as honest and hard workers. When interviewed in 1881, former neighbor Orlando Saunders gave a fairly positive appraisal of Joseph’s family. “They were the best family in the neighborhood in case of sickness; one was at my house nearly all the time when my father died.”13 Saunders told

Millet, ed., To Be Learned Is Good If ... (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 129-47.


12 Marvin S. Hill, review of Roger Anderson, Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined, in Brigham Young University Studies 30 (Fall 1990): 73. Hill also noted that eleven of the fifty witnesses were members of the Presbyterian Church in Palmyra. “They would be unlikely to speak kindly of the Smiths after they left the Presbyterian Church” (ibid.).

Frederic G. Mather that the Smiths “were very good people. Young Joe (as we called him then), has worked for me, and he was a good worker; they all were. . . . He was always a gentleman when about my place.”

Is this the same Joseph who is described in the Hurlbut affidavits as “lazy” and “destitute of moral character?” Clearly those that signed the Howe affidavits didn’t like the Smiths, but the author is simply wrong when he asserts that “there is not an affidavit by even one non-Mormon contemporary of Smith which sympathetically evaluates the man” (pp. 18-22), since many of them do.

For Langfield, however, the mere fact that young Joseph had enemies is reason enough to condemn him. “The apostles and prophets, during the earliest days of Christianity, were not accused of being rank charlatans” (p. 22). On the contrary, the second-century anti-Christian Celsus states, “According to the Jews, Jesus collected around him ten or eleven unsavory characters—tax collectors, sailors, and the like, and scurried about making a living as best they were able, usually through double dealing and in other questionable ways.”

Jesus himself was thought to work wonders by the use of magic and incantations. . . . Perhaps this is the origin of the hypocrisy for which the Christians are so well known. . . . Just as the charlatans of the cults take advantage of the simpleton’s lack of education to lead him around by the nose, so too with the Christian teachers.”

Shallow criticisms such as these did little to explain the appeal and remarkable success of Christianity, yet they have a great deal in common with early criticisms of Joseph Smith and the Mormons by critics such as E. D. Howe.

Early Christian Teachings

Langfield alleges that Mormon teachings contradict early Christian doctrines. He is appalled by the Mormon teaching of deification, that men can become gods (pp. 81-83), but similar ideas are to be found among the primitive Christian saints and theologians.

14 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 53-54.
Benz has observed, "One can think what one wants of this doctrine of progressive deification, but one thing is certain: with this anthropology Joseph Smith is closer to the view of man held by the ancient Church than the precursors of the Augustinian doctrine of original sin." 18

Langfield asserts that 1 Corinthians 15:29 has absolutely nothing to do with proxy baptism (pp. 87-90). Most biblical scholars today, however, admit that this is exactly what Paul had reference to, although most will say that they don't know much about it. The Lutheran scholar and bishop Krister Stendahl states that "the text seems to speak plainly enough about a practice within the Church of vicarious baptism for the dead. This is the view of most contemporary exegetes." 19 "The normal reading of the text," writes Gordon Fee, "is that some Corinthians are being baptized, apparently vicariously, in behalf of some people who have already died. It would be fair to add that this reading is such a plain understanding of the Greek text that no one would ever have imagined the various alternatives were it not for the difficulties involved." 20 "It seems that in Corinth," writes Raymond E. Brown, "some Christians would undergo baptism in the name of their deceased non-Christian relatives and friends, hoping this vicarious baptism might assure them a share in the redemption of Christ." 21 Contrary to the Langfield's assertion, these interpretations accord nicely with the Mormon understanding of this passage.22

20 Gordon Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 763-64.
The author also asserts that passages in the Book of Mormon such as Alma 34:32-34; Mosiah 15:26; and Moroni 8:22-23 forbid baptism for the dead (pp. 87-88); however, the first two passages are concerned with those people who "willfully rebel" against God after having had the opportunity to repent and receive the Gospel, and have nothing to do with proxy baptism for those denied an opportunity. Moroni 8:22-23 does not forbid baptism for the dead either, but merely says that those who die without the law are not under condemnation until they can receive the law. Someday all men will hear the gospel and have the chance to repent and receive any blessings which baptism offers, but they can't repent until they are taught.

Langfield convulses with dismay over the teaching that Jesus and Lucifer had once been spirit brothers (p. 76). Critics who use this argument rarely point out that Mormons believe that all God’s children were spirit children of God and that Christ was the “firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29). Early Christians appear to have had little trouble with the concept that so frightens the author.23

Spaulding or Something

When it comes to the Book of Mormon, Langfield is “struck with a sense of surprise that the crude and unusual publication ever gained a following” (p. 32). He attributes its origin to Spaulding’s Manuscript Found. “Somehow [Langfield never explains how], Joseph Smith obtained the manuscript and enlarged upon it. In fact, witnesses acquainted with Spaulding, upon reading the Book of Mormon, said it sounded very much

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23 “Before creating the world, God produced a spirit like Himself, replete with the virtues of the Father. Later he made another, in whom the mark of divine origin was erased, because this one was besmirched by the poison of jealousy and turned therefore from good to evil. . . . He was jealous of his older Brother who, remaining united with the Father, insured his affection unto himself. This being who from good became bad is called Devil by the Greeks.” Lactantius, Divine Institutes II, 9, in Giovanni Papini, The Devil (New York: Dutton, 1954), 81-82. Papini notes, “According to Lactantius, Lucifer would have been nothing less than the brother of the Logos. . . . The elder spirit, filled with every divine virtue and beloved by God above all other spirits, can easily be recognized as the word, that is, the Son. But Lactantius’s story leads one to think that the other spirit, also endowed with every grace, was the second son of the Father: the future Satan would be no less, the younger brother of the future Christ” (ibid.).
like *Manuscript Found*" (p. 34). But these statements were made seventeen years after Spaulding's death in 1816 and three years after the Book of Mormon was published and had become a common object of ridicule. In 1884, much to the chagrin of anti-Mormon critics, Spaulding's unpublished manuscript was rediscovered and found to show little resemblance to the Book of Mormon narrative. Most critics have now abandoned the theory, appealing to other environmental explanations. Of the original statements published in 1834, Fawn Brodie observed, "it can clearly be seen that the affidavits were written by Hurlbut, since the style is the same throughout. It may be noted that although five out of the eight had heard Spaulding's story only once, there was a surprising uniformity in the details they remembered after twenty-two years. . . The very tightness with which Hurlbut here was implementing his theory rouses an immediate suspicion that he did a little judicious prompting."24

According to Brodie, later statements collected in the 1870s and 1880s are "all suspect because they corroborate only the details of the first handful of documents collected by Hurlbut and frequently use the same language. Some are outright perjury."25 Even Jerald and Sandra Tanner, whom Langfield quotes, find the Spaulding theory untenable.26 "The usual debater," noted the nineteenth-century anti-Mormon writer Davis H. Bays, "undertakes to trace the Book of Mormon to the Spaulding romance through Sidney Rigdon. Nothing can be more erroneous, and it will lead to almost certain defeat. The well-informed advocate of Mormonism wants no better amusement than to vanquish an opponent in discussion who takes this ground. The facts are all opposed to this view, and the defenders of the Mormon dogma have the facts well in hand. I speak from experience. . . . The Spaulding story is a failure. Do not attempt to rely upon it—it will let you down."27

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25 Ibid., 452.
26 Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Did Spaulding Write the Book of Mormon?* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1977).
Langfield asserts that the testimonies of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon must be rejected because all three apostatized from the Church. What Langfield fails to point out is that, while all three witnesses left the Church and David Whitmer never returned, all three remained faithful to their testimonies as given in 1830. The fact that after they left the Church they continued to reaffirm that they had seen the plates and the angel strengthens rather than weakens those testimonies in my view. Langfield is also woefully unfamiliar with the works of responsible historians on the witnesses, the foremost of whom is Richard Lloyd Anderson. Anderson, whose landmark articles on the witnesses received the Best Article Award from the Mormon History Association, makes a compelling case for the credibility of the witnesses with which no Book of Mormon critic has yet attempted to deal.

Proof or Evidence

In discussing research on the Book of Mormon, it is proper to make a distinction between proof and evidence. Evidence is that which suggests or tends to support a particular conclusion, while proof represents something positively established. Evidence is tentative, while proof approaches definitive certainty. Langfield asserts that there is no archaeological evidence which supports the historicity of the Book of Mormon. “There is an enormous amount of evidence,” he asserts, “both in ancient records and in the ruins of ancient cities, which tells more than enough about the civilizations with which the Book of Mormon allegedly deals. That evidence proves the Book of Mormon false” (pp. 37-38, emphasis added). But Langfield’s evidence, by definition, does no such thing, since at best some evidence might suggest that conclusion to the author, but that evidence cannot ultimately “disprove” the historicity of the Book of Mormon. There is also a substantial array of evidence which supports the book’s veracity, although not proving the Book of Mormon true. Considering Lang-

29 See, for example, John L. Sorenson, An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985); Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds., Warfare in the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990). “The evidence that will prove or disprove the Book of
field’s ignorance of recent Book of Mormon scholarship, he seems hardly qualified to make such a statement.30

Langfield describes Hugh Nibley as “out of touch with reality” because he has stated that archaeology rarely yields more than plausibility. For Langfield, the Bible is totally proven, while the Book of Mormon is not (pp. 37-42, 110-16). But here it is Langfield and not Nibley who is “out of touch with reality.” Concerning the Old Testament, William Dever recently stated that “after a century of modern research neither Biblical scholars nor archaeologists have been able to document as historical any of the events, much less the personalities of the Mosaic era.”31 “In spite of all the light that has been cast on the patriarchal age,” writes John Bright, “in spite of all that has been done to vindicate the antiquity of the tradition, archaeology has not proved that the stories of the patriarchs happened just as the Bible tells them. . . . At the same time—and this must be said with equal emphasis—no evidence has come to light contradicting any item of the tradition. One may believe it or not as one sees fit, but proof is lacking either way.”32 “Ultimately archaeology can neither prove nor disprove the Old Testament, only modern theories about what it may mean.”33 In discussing archaeological evidence for the New Testament, James Charlesworth states that “studying archaeology . . . never should be seen as an attempt to prove or support any faith or theology. Authentic faith certainly needs no such shoring up.

Mormon does not exist. When, indeed, is a thing proven? Only when an individual has accumulated in his own conscience enough observations, impressions, reasonings, and feelings to satisfy him personally that it is so. The same evidence which convinces one expert may leave another completely unsatisfied; the impressions that build up to definite proof are themselves nontransferable.” Hugh Nibley, Since Cumorah, vol. 7 in The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), xiv.

30 The most recent piece of Book of Mormon scholarship cited by Langfield is Nibley’s work, An Approach to the Book of Mormon, originally published almost thirty years ago (1964). From it Langfield draws one insignificant citation and never mentions it again (p. 38).
Philologists, historians, and archaeologists cannot give Christians a risen Lord; but they can help them better understand Jesus’s life, thought, and death.”34 The same can be said about archaeology and the Book of Mormon.

Anachronisms

Langfield asserts that the Book of Mormon makes a serious blunder when Alma states that Jesus would be “born of Mary at Jerusalem which is the land of our fathers” (Alma 7:10). “Every schoolboy and schoolgirl knows Christ was born in Bethlehem” (p. 53). Quite true. What every schoolboy and schoolgirl would not have known was that Bethlehem, a mere six miles from Jerusalem, was actually part of a district known as the “land of Jerusalem,” of which Jerusalem was the capital. The Amarna Letters speak of “a town of the land of Jerusalem, Bit-Lahmi by name” which Albright considered “an almost certain reference to the town of Bethlehem.”35 Jerusalem continued to play an important political role from the time of David down to the time of the Babylonian Exile. Solomon divided the southern part of the kingdom into twelve administrative districts, each governed by an administrative capital.36 A. F. Rainey has provided a map which shows where these districts were located. District 9 included the towns of Zobah, Manahath, Bether, Peor, Etam, Tekoa, Beth-haccerem, Behurim, Netophah, Kullani, Tatam, Galim, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem, which was the district capital.37 In the time of Hezekiah, these districts were reduced to four, but Jerusalem still “did double duty as the royal and district capital.”38 Jerusalem at this period was more than just a city. Babylonian documents refer to Jerusalem as “the city of

[38] Aharoni, The Archaeology of the Land of Israel, 259.
Judah," representing everything under the control of the king. Even the book of Jeremiah describes the siege of Jerusalem as a time when Nebuchadnezzar's armies fought "against Jerusalem, and against all its cities" (Jeremiah 34:1, New American Standard Bible). Since Jerusalem was the royal and national capital of Judah "all its [Jerusalem's] cities" clearly means all those cities under the national government of Jerusalem, i.e., all the cities of Judah (Jeremiah 34:7). Even if we are more conservative and interpret the phrase "all its cities" as referring only to the Jerusalem district, this would still take in Bethlehem, which was under Jerusalem's jurisdiction. It also needs to be remembered that the term "Jerusalem" is sometimes also used as a general name for the whole southern kingdom (2 Kings 21:13; Isaiah 10:10-11; Ezekiel 23:4; Micah 1:1, 5), just as Samaria is a national designation for Israel in the north (1 Kings 13:32; 2 Kings 17:24, 26; 23:19; Ezra 4:16). So whether Alma was using the term "Jerusalem" as a national designation for the kingdom of Judah or only the Jerusalem district, he is correct on both counts.

Quoting M. T. Lamb, Langfield asserts that the idea that Lehi could write in Egyptian is anachronistic, since Lehi was a Jew and the Jews supposedly hated the Egyptians (pp. 42-43). He also oddly asserts that Hebrew would have been the only language known or spoken by Israelites in Lehi's day (ibid.). If Langfield had taken even a cursory look at the Old Testament he would see that such an assertion is a little naive.

39 "Seventh year: In the month of Kislimu, the King of Akkad called up his army, marched against the city of Judah and seized the town on the second month of Adar"; Pritchard, The Ancient Near East, 1:203.


41 Hugh Nibley discusses reasons for Egyptian influences in Lehi in the Desert, 6-34; An Approach to the Book of Mormon, 84-92.
king of Assyria sends his messengers to Jerusalem, they are met by representatives of King Hezekiah and converse together in Aramaic (the language of international communication), a language which Hezekiah’s men know in addition to their native Hebrew (2 Kings 18:26; Isaiah 36:11). Moreover, if Lehi was a merchant, as Nibley suggests, it would make perfect sense for him to be fluent in several Near Eastern languages. So common was the knowledge of Egyptian in Lehi’s day that one of his contemporaries could write, “Behold, are not the Ethiopian, the Syrian, and all foreigners alike instructed in the language of Egypt?” The author also derides the idea of “Reformed Egyptian,” but that designation is just as good as any to describe Demotic Egyptian, a kind of “short hand Egyptian.”

Langfield spends three pages ridiculing the account of the Jaredite barges and the account of the luminescent stones. “In this author’s opinion, the words ‘patently ridiculous’ seem too kind” (p. 45). Our charitable author seems to be unaware, however, that certain aspects of the account bear a remarkable resemblance to ancient Jewish legends about Noah, which were unavailable to Joseph Smith in 1830. One Jewish legend relates that “the ark was illuminated by a precious stone, the light of which was more brilliant by night than by day, so enabling Noah to distinguish between day and night.”

Langfield asserts that the Book of Mormon contradicts itself when Alma 30:2 says that “there began to be continual peace,” since war begins again several chapters later (p. 46); however, the Book of Mormon uses the term “continual peace” to specify a duration of time uninterrupted by strife and conflict. A similar expression can be found in Genesis where the flood waters “returned from off the earth continually” for 150 days and “decreased continually until the tenth month” (Genesis 8:3,

43 Ibid., 11.
5. Is Mr. Langfield going to reject the Bible since it uses a similar phrase?

Other issues raised by Langfield—such as changes in the Book of Mormon (pp. 49-50), whether early Mormons believed there were men on the moon (p. 94), the Kinderhook plates (pp. 59-60), and alleged false prophecies of Joseph Smith (pp. 93-100)—have all been answered elsewhere and need not be dealt with here.

In spite of its misleading title, this book has little to do with "the truth about Mormonism." Although it claims to represent the fruits of years of study and "exhaustive research," the author cannot hide the fact that he has failed to do his homework. Ignoring the complexities of Mormonism and its founding book will not make those complexities go away. Since 1830, over 2000 anti-Mormon works like Langfield’s have been published. Over half of those have been published since 1960 and a third since 1970 alone. It is perhaps significant that during those last thirty years The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has grown faster than at any other time in its history, fulfilling in certain measure the prediction of Brigham Young: "Every time you kick Mormonism you kick it upstairs; You never kick it downstairs. The Lord Almighty so orders it." Although we can be confident, as the Church continues to

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53 JD 7:145. "Let us alone, and we will send Elders to the uttermost parts of the earth, and gather out Israel, wherever they are; and if you persecute us, we will do it the quicker, because we are naturally dull when let alone, and are disposed to take a little sleep, a little slumber, and a little rest. If you let us alone, we will do it a little more leisurely; but if you persecute us, we will sit up nights and preach the Gospel." JD 2:320.
grow, that the Book of Mormon will continue to be an object of attack and ridicule, critics will get little consolation from Langfield’s book. They will never bury Mormonism with a shovel like this.