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Death Knell or Tinkling Cymbals?
Reviewed by Stephen D. Ricks

Wesley P. Walters, late pastor of Marissa United Presbyterian Church in Marissa, Illinois, maintained, until his recent death, a long-time interest in the earliest years of the Restoration. The Use of the Old Testament in the Book of Mormon, reflective of that interest, was originally submitted by Walters to Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, in April 1981, for the Master of Theology degree, and in 1990 was duplicated and distributed by the Utah Lighthouse Ministry, the publishing concern of Jerald and Sandra Tanner.

The title of this study belies its actual scope. While focusing primarily on the use of an Old Testament framework and Old Testament passages in the Book of Mormon—for which he provides a close analysis of the Isaiah passages found there, where they are compared with the King James Version—Reverend Walters also deals with the order in which the Book of Mormon was composed, the origin of the names in the Book of Mormon, and eschatological themes found in Ethan Smith's View of the Hebrews and in the Book of Mormon. The appendices at the end of the thesis further reflect the wide swath that Reverend Walters intends to cut: "Authoritative 'Scriptures' of the Mormon Church"; "Preliminary Draft of Lucy Smith's History"; "Sources for Book of Mormon Names" ("Book of Mormon Names"; "Patterns in Non-Biblical Names"; "The Name Mormon"); "Checking Variances of Book of Mormon with King James Version—Book of Isaiah"; "Poultney Congregational Church Records"; "Comparison of Book of Mormon and King James Version."

Reverend Walters is clearly better informed and more irenic than the average anti-Mormon. But his methodological presuppositions, no less than those of other anti-Mormon writers, flaw his work irretrievably. Two points in particular are crucial to the success of his argument in this thesis: (1) that the translation process was not as Mormons have claimed it to be, and (2) that Joseph Smith knew more about the Old Testament
than Latter-day Saints have generally admitted. As we shall see, neither of his assumptions can be sustained.

Walters accuses Joseph (and the Book of Mormon) of endless anachronistic steals from the language of the King James New Testament. But he notes that Latter-day Saints, in response to his claim, might argue that Joseph Smith was "not given the words of the Book of Mormon in the 'translation' process but was given only the thoughts or concepts and allowed to express them in his own words" (p. 12), a position which he regards as "contrary to the facts." 1 After all, says Walters, "the Book of Mormon is not written in Joseph Smith's own style of writing. We have copies of his letters dating from 1829, the period in which he was working on the Book of Mormon. His style is not that of the King James version's Elizabethan English" (p.12). This argument, crucial to the impact of much of what he writes later, borders on incoherence. Aren't we all capable of articulating our thoughts in different "registers" (levels of language in speech or writing)—to borrow a term from linguistics—depending on the situation in which we find ourselves? 2 Quite unconsciously, our choice of vocabulary and sometimes even of syntax varies depending on whether we are casually conversing among friends, talking to children, speaking in a formal setting, writing, or praying. And doesn't each of these equally represent our "own style" of speaking or writing? Didn't T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" or "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and his letters written at the same time as those poems both reflect his "own style"? The registers

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1 Among the first to formulate this position, as Walters notes (p. 12), was B. H. Roberts, Defense of the Faith and the Saints (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1907). More recently, see Edward Ashment, "The Book of Mormon—A Literal Translation?" Sunstone 5 (March-April 1980): 10-14; and Stephen D. Ricks, "Joseph Smith's Means and Method of Translating the Book of Mormon," F.A.R.M.S. paper, 1986, where I attempt to examine all of the primary evidence concerning the translation process, including the testimonies of all of those who were witnesses to the translation.

for letter writing and for translation can also be substantially different. I am currently translating a fairly complex and technical book from German into English, an English that is distinct from what I would use in letter writing. By Walters’s view of these matters, my letters and my translation could not possibly both be expressed in my “own style.” These differences, by Walters’s assessment, could only have arisen either (1) because I didn’t do both the translation and the letters, since only one, at most, is done in my “own style”; or (2) because the putative translation isn’t really a translation at all, but a collage of bits and scraps of one or more English sources that I have cobbled together by free association. (Would Walters have been more convinced if the Book of Mormon were more like Joseph Smith’s letters, or if his letters were more like the Book of Mormon?) I can say with fair confidence that neither of these conclusions is correct in my case, and that they are equally flawed with respect to Joseph Smith and the translation of the Book of Mormon. When Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, he quite understandably rendered it into what he regarded as a scriptural register. For him, this meant language like that of the King James Version, with whose phrases and cadences he was very familiar. Could he have translated the Book of Mormon in the same style as he wrote letters, without the use of King James phraseology? Certainly, but much of its impact would have been lost and its nuances missed by its readers—precisely the reason for differences in registers. Even most of the more recent translations of the Bible into English have maintained much of the elevated style of the earlier versions (a notable exception to this would be some of the—in my opinion execrable—paraphrases of the Bible, which are in fact no translations at all).

The implications of one’s view of the translation process are highly significant. If one accepts (1) that Joseph could—and did—speak and write in different registers; (2) that he translated the ideas found on the plates of the Book of Mormon into a scriptural register, as his experience would have guided him to understand what such a register would be like; and (3) that the register of scriptural translation likely included phrases from other scriptures translated into English (i.e., the King James

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3 Needless to say, a register that contains phrases and expressions from the scriptures, or any other work of literature, remains just as much one’s “own style” as a register in which these are not so clearly to be found.
Version of the Bible)—none of which contradicts the testimony of those who actually witnessed the translation process—then the impact of Walters’s lengthy discussion of the similarities and differences between the Isaiah and other scriptural passages in the King James Version and in the Book of Mormon is greatly vitiates. One who accepts the existence of plates containing Isaiah passages will find no difficulty in allowing for some differences between that underlying text and the one underlying the King James translation (the Masoretic text), or the Dead Sea Scrolls text, or the Septuagint version. Further, allowing that there may be some differences in the underlying texts, and allowing that the same underlying ideas may be expressed in a translation with equal correctness in many different ways, then Walters’s lengthy toting up of the differences in the number of changes in the Isaiah chapters in the Book of Mormon becomes an exercise in meaninglessness.

Reverend Walters notes that some biblical verses are repeated more than once in the translation of the Book of Mormon, but that “there was no attempt to make the alterations at that point agree with alterations made earlier.” This, for Reverend Walters, “argues strongly for the alterations having been the arbitrary changes made by Joseph Smith, rather than a part of some ancient Semitic text” (p. 89). To the contrary, this strikes me as an implicit demonstration that the Book of Mormon is a translation made (contra Walters) without any, or at least without constant, reference to the King James Version. My own experience in translating suggests the difficulty in rendering the same word or phrase uniformly throughout a lengthy translation. Walters appears to have forgotten that it is possible to render the same word, phrase, or sentence of one language into another in more than one way while still reflecting with acceptable accuracy the sense of the original. It is even possible

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4 I have not made up my mind whether Joseph had the King James Version to hand when he was translating the Book of Mormon. Some Latter-day Saint scholars assume that he did have one. However, the witnesses to the translation process never mention anything about an English translation being present while the book was being translated. Indeed, Emma, when specifically asked by her interviewers (including her son, Joseph III, and her second husband, Major Bidamon) whether Joseph might have had “a book or manuscript from which he read, or dictated” to her, replied, “He had neither manuscript nor book to read from,” and “if he had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me.” Saints’ Herald 26 (1 October 1879): 289.
for the same person to understand the same word, phrase, or sentence in slightly different ways at two different times. Or does Reverend Walters reject all English translations of the Bible but one, since they may render the same verse in slightly different ways? (If they all rendered the verses in the Bible in the same way, they wouldn’t be different versions, but simply aping an original translation.) The Reverend Walters is himself not above making missteps in representing Hebrew: on page 28, he cites šōpēt, which he says is mistranslated in the Bible as “judge,” as šōpēt, a word unattested in the Bible (the Hebrew letters represented in transliteration as t and t are as different as d and t in English).

Walters asserts that Joseph Smith had a far more subtle knowledge of the Old Testament than Latter-day Saints have been willing to allow, and that this knowledge (1) “provided a framework for Joseph Smith’s tale about the ancient inhabitants of America”; (2) “offered an opportunity for Joseph Smith to express his understanding of some significant Old Testament passages”; and (3) “supplied support for his eschatological position” (p. 5). I’m not quite certain which Mormons he is talking about. I, for one, have always assumed that Joseph’s knowledge of the Bible, including the Old Testament, was already formidable by the time that he began translating the Book of Mormon. However, no amount of acquaintance with the Old Testament, no matter how impressive, can easily explain the exceedingly subtle grasp of detail of ancient Israelite life found in the Book of Mormon. The sophisticated knowledge of Old Testament culture, practice, and thought reflected in the Book of Mormon—including festivals, legal niceties, principles of warfare, and covenant ideals and formulas, to name but a few—often surpasses anything that was known or written about the Old Testament or ancient Israel in Joseph’s own day. And it was precisely in those sorts of details that Joseph’s knowledge sometimes flagged. A story, related by Joseph’s wife, Emma, and retold by David Whitmer, illustrates this point. In the latter part of 1827 and the early part of 1828, when the book of Lehi was being translated and Emma was acting as scribe, Joseph translated a passage describing Jerusalem as a walled city (cf. 1 Nephi 4:4) and stopped to ask Emma if Jerusalem did in fact have walls. In 1856, Emma recalled this incident:

When my husband was translating the Book of Mormon, I wrote a part of it, as he dictated each
sentence, word for word, and when he came to proper names he could not pronounce, or long words, he spelled them out, and while I was writing them, if I made a mistake in spelling, he would stop me and correct my spelling, although it was impossible for him to see how I was writing them down at the time. . . . When he stopped for any purpose at any time he would, when he commenced again, begin where he left off without any hesitation, and one time while he was translating he stopped suddenly, pale as a sheet, and said, "Emma, did Jerusalem have walls around it?" When I answered, "Yes," he replied, "Oh! I was afraid I had been deceived." He had such a limited knowledge of history at the time that he did not even know that Jerusalem was surrounded by walls.  

David Whitmer also reports this incident: "When in translating he first came where Jerusalem was spoken of as a 'Walled City' he stopped until they got a Bible and showed him where the fact was recorded—Smith not believing it was a walled city."  

Further, the Old Testament (along with ancient Israelite customs and practices) may, in fact, play the important role that it does in the Book of Mormon because it represents (as the book itself repeatedly claims) the historical and religious background of the Lehite colony. Couldn't this knowledge of the Old Testament found in the Book of Mormon be explained as reflecting the record of a people for whom the Old Testament was not simply an antique document but the reflection of a living system? If a group of Israelites were to have settled in another part of the world, wouldn't we expect them to take their culture, religion, and mores with them? Similarly, if Americans were to settle in another, uninhabited part of the world, wouldn't they bring with them their culture, in all its various aspects? Further, other ancient Israelite/Jewish groups used the Old Testament in much the same way as that attributed by Walters to Joseph Smith in composing the Book of Mormon. The Qumran (Dead Sea

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Scrolls) community, for example, was composed of individuals who left what they considered to be a corrupt society (just as is the case with the Lehite colony or the Alma group), who wrote commentaries on various books of the Old Testament—as witness their writings on the books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Psalms—to express their "understanding of some significant Old Testament passages." In the background of their vivid and ongoing eschatological concern was the Old Testament. Though the Qumran covenanters wrote relatively little of their own history, one of the previously unpublished documents does contain some sense of the origins and early history of the community.

Walters's argument concerning the use of the Bible in the Book of Mormon is more important than it may at first blush appear, since it serves to underpin an implicit general theory for the origin of the Book of Mormon. He refuses to allow that the Book of Mormon came forth according to the traditional account. Thus, he must seek for other underlying sources and impulses in order to explain, as James Black puts it,

> how such an ill-educated man could produce so elaborate a system. This is a bigger problem than most people imagine. It requires an exceedingly able scholar to foist a highly wrought-out fraud that lasts for over a century upon the public, however credulous. The mere credulity of the people in any case does not explain the matter; for the elaborate system, expressed in fairly dignified language, and with some interesting historical speculation, still remains unexplained.7

The explanation, for Walters, lies in Joseph's formidable knowledge of the Bible: "If he [Joseph] knew the Bible well enough to scatter biblical phrases freely throughout the Book of Mormon, there is no reason why he could not have composed the book itself" (p. 13, emphasis added). If I am understanding Walters's argument aright, he is claiming that if it can be shown that Joseph Smith did indeed have a wide knowledge of the Bible, sufficient that he could pepper the Book of Mormon with phrases from it, then there is nothing in the Book of Mormon he could not have written himself. Walters "proves" his assertion by pointing out the similarities in language between the Bible

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and the Book of Mormon, something that has been perfectly clear to every reader of the Book of Mormon—believer and unbeliever alike—from the time of its first publication. Walters’s argument might be more compelling if the whole Book of Mormon were simply a tissue of quotations from the Bible, something it clearly is not. Complex war passages, lengthy sermons, and extended discussions of the movements of peoples have no parallel in the Bible. Or may we infer from Walters’s statement that anyone who knows the Bible well could write a book like the Book of Mormon? So, where are all these books?

I am reminded of Hugh Nibley’s challenge to his students:

Since Joseph Smith was younger than most of you and not nearly so experienced or well-educated as any of you at the time he copyrighted the Book of Mormon, it should not be too much to ask you to hand in by the end of the semester (which will give you more time than he had) a paper of, say, five to six hundred pages in length. Call it a sacred book if you will, and give it the form of a history. Tell of a community of wandering Jews in ancient times; have all sorts of characters in your story, and involve them in all sorts of public and private vicissitudes; give them names—hundreds of them—pretending that they are real Hebrew and Egyptian names of around 600 B.C.; be lavish with cultural and technical details—manners and customs, arts and industries, political and religious institutions, rites, and traditions—include long and complicated military and economic histories; have your narrative cover a thousand years without any large gaps; keep a number of interrelated local histories going at once; feel free to introduce religious controversy and philosophical discussion, but always in a plausible setting; observe the appropriate literary conventions and explain the derivation and transmission of your varied historical materials. Above all, do not ever contradict yourself! For now we come to the really hard part of this little assignment. You and I know that you are making this all up—we have our little joke—but just the same you are going to be required to have your paper published when you finish it, not as fiction or romance, but as a true history! After you have handed it in you may
make no changes in it (in this class we always use the first edition of the Book of Mormon); what is more, you are to invite any and all scholars to read and criticize your work freely, explaining to them that it is a sacred book on a par with the Bible. If they seem over-skeptical, you might tell them that you translated the book from original records by the aid of the Urim and Thummim—they will love that! Further to allay their misgivings, you might tell them that the original manuscript was on golden plates, and that you got the plates from an angel. Now go to work and good luck!  

But for Walters “the really fatal blow to the proposal that the New Testament material in the Old Testament portion of the Book of Mormon is due to Joseph Smith’s employment of such phrases in the process of translating the book is that such material goes much deeper than the mere use of words and phrases” to include “New Testament concepts, interpretations and theology . . . all worked into the text itself” (p. 13). But isn’t this precisely what the Book of Mormon suggests we should expect? After all, from the beginning the Nephites are the quintessential “church of anticipation” (to borrow a phrase used by Prof. Frank M. Cross of another pre-Christian Jewish group, the Qumranites) who, though firmly anchored in the law of Moses, know of Christ’s teachings and eagerly look to his coming: “And notwithstanding we believe in Christ, we keep the law of Moses, and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ, until the law shall be fulfilled.” Nephi continues, “[though] we keep the law because of the commandments,” nevertheless, “we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:24-26). Walters cites some of these passages, too, but then he counters, “by 147 B.C. a Christian Church is depicted as flourishing, of which people become members through baptism” (pp. 15-16), and

Christian baptism was said to be taught among the Nephites five hundred years before Christ. . . . To

introduce the New Testament practice of baptism in the name of Christ into the Old Testament period is to confuse the Old and New Covenants and the ordinance connected with each. The book of Hebrews is very specific that while the Old Testament was in force, the New clearly was not. When the New Covenant had been established, the Old Covenant was abolished (Heb. 8:13, 10:1-9). (pp. 15-16)

Even if we accept Walters's interpretation of Hebrews 8:13 and 10:1-9, it is not incompatible with what is found in the Book of Mormon (or must we now also accept his interpretation of the text of the Book of Mormon?). Where in the law of Moses is a person forbidden to be baptized? (In fact, Walters himself notes that "there is what can legitimately be called Old Testament baptism" [p. 16].) And since when would membership in a "church" (a word which is used to translate the biblical Greek ekklēsia, "church," "congregation," which in turn is used in the Septuagint to render the Hebrew qāhāl, "congregation," "assembly," "convocation of the people," a word that, tellingly, is frequently used of Israel in the Mosaic period; cf. Exodus 12:6; Leviticus 16:17; Numbers 14:5) contravene Mosaic injunctions? Nothing could be more clear in the Book of Mormon than that what they do in the name of Christ before his coming they do to anticipate that coming, not to overturn the law of Moses.

Joseph Smith further errs, according to Reverend Walters, by misinterpreting New Testament passages that are anachronistically enjambed in the "Old Testament" section of the Book of Mormon. Thus, for example, Walters claims that the Melchizedek passages in the Book of Mormon (presumably Alma 13:14-19, although he does not cite it explicitly) represent a misinterpretation of the book of Hebrews (which itself is based upon an understanding of Genesis 14 and Psalm 110:4). Walters appears to be proceeding from the mistaken—and arrogant—assumption that there is only one proper interpretation of these biblical passages. But, as John W. Welch has shown in his study "The Melchizedek Material in Alma 13:13-19":

From these traditional biblical texts [about Melchizedek], there have come about as many interpretations of Melchizedek as there have been heresies and orthodoxies, for few systematic biblical commentators have passed over this intriguing figure
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without accommodating him in one way or another. The importance ascribed to him varies with the system in which each interpretation stands. In some views he is regarded merely as a political figure who established certain legal precedents, while in others he becomes a central eschatological figure who will lead the war against Satan in the final battle against evil. Elsewhere he is raised to membership in the Godhead by one early Christian sect, while he is defamed as a bastard by Jewish apologists who found his unpedigreed preeminence in the Pentateuch disquieting. Gnostics and Christian mystics have ascribed cosmological powers to him, whereas Protestants have dismissed any notion that he was anything more than a feudal Canaanite king.9

I think that it is equally arguable that the interpretation of Melchizedek in Alma, far from being anachronistic and misguided, is the correct one, and that of Walters misconceived. This point is, of course, equally true of other asserted “misapplication[s] of scripture” (p. 95). Such a claim by Walters is not particularly surprising, since there is a tendency among members of the evangelical Protestant community (of which Reverend Walters was a member) to assume that there is a single interpretation of scripture (I cannot say how many times I have heard from fundamentalists, evangelicals, and members of other Christian groups the patently false assertion that “the Bible interprets itself”) and to disallow competing interpretations. In the case of Latter-day Saints, they sometimes claim that our (from their point of view false) interpretations are the result of being duped or of consciously deceiving. All of this skirts the crucial issue of authority: Latter-day Saints accept prophets as a source of authoritative interpretation of tradition (including the scriptural tradition), whereas many Protestant groups accept no authority beyond the Bible, and must thus assert that the Bible interprets itself. Since they claim no authority for themselves, I see no reason why we should feel bound by their interpretation of scripture—or pay much attention to it at all, for that matter.

Since Reverend Walters sees the Book of Mormon as a collection of so many—often awkward and naive—grabs from the Bible, it is not surprising that he scolds Joseph for lifting stories from the Bible and refashioning them for the Book of Mormon. Thus Nephi and Lehi in the book of Helaman had stood in the midst of a pillar of fire, “and like the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace ‘they were as standing in the midst of fire, and were not burned.’ As their opponents stood in awe, a voice was heard calling them to repentance and ‘it was a still small voice of perfect mildness’ (Helaman 5:24ff.)” (p. 27). Walters further believes “that the Book of Mormon author was drawing upon the Book of Daniel” because of its comment about Aminadi: “It reports that ‘he interpreted the writing which was upon the wall of the temple, which was written by the finger of God’ (Alma 10:2/Daniel 5:5ff.)” (p. 27). Does this mean that the same events cannot occur more than once? If God is the same “yesterday, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8), a point of which those of the Reverend Walters’s persuasion are wont to remind us, doesn’t it seem at least plausible that God could act in the same, or in a similar manner, more than once? If Walters were to extend this interpretation to the Bible, all of its historical doublets would have to be examined and one or the other (or both) excised as shameless and unimaginative plagiarisms. I reject such an interpretive method for the Bible and for the Book of Mormon.

Reverend Walters reproves Joseph at length for using the Exodus theme in the Book of Mormon (pp. 26-27). This is particularly puzzling, since it is a point that several Latter-day Saint writers have seen as a parade example of the Book of Mormon’s literary complexity and of its fidelity to one of the formative themes of ancient Israelite thought. The eminent

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10 E.g., the crossing of the Red (Reed) Sea on dry land by Moses (Exodus 14:15-22) and the crossing of the Jordan on dry land by Joshua (Joshua 3:14-17); Elijah’s striking the waters of the Jordan River and causing them to part (2 Kings 2:8) and Elisha’s doing the same thing (2 Kings 2:14); Elijah raising the son of the widow of Zarephathah (1 Kings 17:17-23) and Elisha raising from the dead the son of the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:18-37).

Jewish scholar David Daube, in *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible*, has shown in detail how widespread the theme of the Exodus is in the Bible.\(^{12}\) Should we expect less of the Book of Mormon, which claims to originate with a family that departed from ancient Israel, or should we be surprised if we do find it?

Joseph’s eschatological framework in the Book of Mormon, according to Walters, is based on Ethan Smith’s *View of the Hebrews*. As elsewhere in Walters’s thesis, I was struck in this section by the relative paucity of his footnotes and bibliography. This is particularly surprising since theses (and dissertations) tend to overdose on bibliography and footnotes, and the purported *View of the Hebrews*/Book of Mormon link is one of the best-trodden trails in anti-Mormon literature.\(^{13}\) While


there is circumstantial evidence that Joseph Smith could have been acquainted with Ethan Smith’s work (cf. pp. 97-99), “even if he had seen [the View of the Hebrews], that would prove nothing unless we could discover something in the Book of Mormon that could not possibly come from any other source.”

Walters himself admits that other writers of Ethan Smith’s time “did join him in concurring with some” of what he calls “Ethan Smith’s eschatological distinctive” (p. 99).

But as we look at Ethan Smith’s “eschatological distinctives” in comparison with the Book of Mormon, the parallels begin to fray. Ethan Smith’s view that the American Indians

*Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St. Louis, MO: Clayton, 1980).


were the lost ten tribes (cf. pp. 102-3) simply does not square with the account in the Book of Mormon, Walters's efforts to prove the contrary notwithstanding (pp. 114-15). According to Walters, "The only difference [between the Book of Mormon view of the lost ten tribes and that in View of the Hebrews] is that Ethan located all of his lost tribes in America, while the Book of Mormon places only a portion of the tribe of Joseph here and the rest are pictured as hidden away from the knowledge of the Jews, somewhere else in the world" (p. 115). Even if we were to accept this statement as accurate, the difference between the two positions is vast, considering the central importance in View of the Hebrews of identifying the Indians with the lost ten tribes. But the association of the Lehite colony with the ten tribes is also misconceived (again, I feel no compulsion to accept Walters's interpretation of the Book of Mormon over my own, or over that of another believing Latter-day Saint). According to the Latter-day Saint historian Richard Bushman, "Lehi and his family were not the ten tribes. Lehi left for the new world 125 years after the Assyrian captivity and from Jerusalem, not Assyria. His people were never identified as the lost tribes. The ten tribes were mentioned, as Parley Pratt noted, by the Savior when he said he would visit them after he left the Nephites, but nothing was said of an American home for the tribes. They were another group located in another part of the world."15

But beyond putative "parallels" between the Book of Mormon and View of the Hebrews that flow from faulty or debatable exegesis, there are the mountains of "unparallels" that argue against Joseph's use of the book. Beyond these "unparallels," there is a further question that must be answered by proponents of the View of the Hebrews hypothesis: why do none of the early critics of the Book of Mormon mention Ethan Smith in their attacks on it? If the parallels are so evident, why weren't they noticed by individuals who were not only acquainted with Ethan Smith's book, but were also existentially interested in its claims? Why wasn't it prominently mentioned as a source for the Book of Mormon until the beginning of the twentieth century, when the book itself had only an antiquarian interest and its contents were no longer so widely a part of popular discussion? My suspicion is that what appear today to

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be “distinctives” of View of the Hebrews, eschatological and otherwise, seemed less so in the early part of the nineteenth century, when these ideas flowed freely in published and unpublished forums.

Wesley Walters is among the most skilled in the craft of anti-Mormon writing. And yet what has he come up with? He has implicitly introduced a general theory to explain the origin of the Book of Mormon. Even if we were to allow all that Walters claims—the Old Testament quotations, the New Testament steals, the egregious anachronisms, the eschatology filched from Ethan Smith—how much of the Book of Mormon would thus be “explained”? A half? A third? A fourth? I doubt even close to that much. So how is the rest of the book to be accounted for? From Joseph Smith’s imagination, that simply overflowed “like a spring freshet”? Or is he a naive and unimaginative plagiarist who can’t even recognize how he’s giving the game away when he incorporates into the Book of Mormon an endless string of New Testament phrases and anachronistic passages from the Old Testament? Or is he part creative genius, part plagiarist? And does this account square with the evidence given by those who knew him best while he was translating the Book of Mormon? As an alternative theory of the origin of the Book of Mormon, Walters’s is no worse than the others. But we have yet to see one that accounts for the evidence of the Book of Mormon better and more completely than the traditional explanation or the Book of Mormon’s internal claims.

But even the constituent elements of Walters’s thesis become persuasive only if we accept his assumptions about how the Book of Mormon was translated, about the interpretation of the Bible and of certain biblical passages, and even about the interpretation of the Book of Mormon itself. Nothing in Reverend Walters’s study convinces me that his presuppositions help to explain the evidence better than the traditional account, with its underlying assumptions. I see no reason why we ought to allow him to set the agenda in these crucial areas.

To those eager to accept the tinkling cymbals of flawed or inadequate explanations of the Book of Mormon, Walters’s book may seem its death knell. (How many have they already heard?) To others, it will almost certainly merit little more than a yawn.