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Title Editor's Introduction: Of Polemics

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Abstract Peterson and others defend the Church and the Book of Mormon against critics although they would prefer to write affirmatively about “the endlessly fascinating, rich, profound, and glorious” gospel.

Editor's Introduction: Of Polemics

Daniel C. Peterson

Why, I and others associated with this *Review* have been asked on a number of occasions, do you have to be so polemical, so argumentative? The question is often put with some feeling, and sometimes even with a kind of sadness. Not infrequently, it comes from people who are, roughly speaking, "on our side."

As a prelude to a partial answer, permit me to share a letter I recently received from a local leader of the Church in a distant foreign country:

Dear brother:

Has there appeared any refutation of the claims in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*? I read it and, together with *Inventing Mormonism* and *Mormon Polygamy: A History*, I am almost persuaded that Joseph Smith was the author of the Book of Mormon, the First Vision and—if I add Buerger's articles in *Dialogue*—of the temple ceremonies.¹

If their claims are valid, it deprives Mormonism of its special appeal. . . . Their arguments and evidences, I think, are solid. I'm asking for more compelling evidences or arguments.²

I was very pleased that we were able to send to this troubled member of the Church a copy of *Review of Books on the Book of*

¹ The letter refers to Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993); H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1994; "distributed by Signature Books"); and Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986). The *Dialogue* articles which it mentions are now substantially available as David John Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness: A History of Mormon Temple Worship* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994; "distributed by Signature Books").

² I have fixed certain very small English errors in the letter; otherwise, it is printed here as I received it.

Mormon 6/1 (1994), which is wholly dedicated to commenting upon *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*. I cannot tell whether or not he will find our arguments persuasive; I know that many have. I am also happy that the present issue of the *Review* contains a discussion of *Inventing Mormonism*.

As usual, certain of the books and authors with whom we concern ourselves have received praise and approval from hardcore anti-Mormons. For instance, the Fall 1994 issue of the *Christian Research Journal*, published by the late "Dr." Walter Martin's Christian Research Institute in San Juan Capistrano, carries ads for such treasures as *How to Rescue Your Loved One from Mormonism* (by David A. Reed and John R. Farkas) and *Mormonism: Changes, Contradictions, Errors* (by John R. Farkas and David A. Reed). In a brief unsigned article, it also praises, along with Mark J. Cares's *Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons*, Brent L. Metcalfe's *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, which it describes as containing "ten devastating essays" against the Book of Mormon, and *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record*, by H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters. Of the latter volume, it says, "Two of Mormonism's most thoughtful and scholarly opponents join forces to prove that Joseph Smith's testimonial claims conflict with the evidence of historical fact. Exhaustively documented—and strongly recommended."³ Utah Missions Incorporated, of Marlow, Oklahoma, enthusiastically offers *Inventing Mormonism* for sale, along with classics like Latayne Scott's *Why We Left Mormonism* and *The Mormon Mirage*, David Reed and John Farkas's *Mormons Answered Verse by Verse*, and a volume of Colleen Ralson's dreadful anti-Mormon cartoons.⁴ Luke Wilson, of Gospel Truths Ministries in Grand Rapids, Michigan, remarks of the same book that it provides "airtight and inescapable evidence" of Joseph Smith's dishonesty.⁵

Well. The French have an ironic saying that, I think, is appropriate here: *Cet animal est très méchant; quand on l'attaque, il se défend* ("This animal is extremely vicious: when

³ *Christian Research Journal* 17/2 [Fall 1994]: 48.

⁴ *The Utah Evangel* 41/7 (October 1994): 8, 9.

⁵ Cited by Mark A. Kellner, "Mormon History Under Scrutiny," *Christianity Today* 38/11 (3 October 1994): 68.

somebody attacks it, it defends itself"). We did not pick this fight with the Church's critics, but we will not withdraw from it. I can only regret that some may think less of us for that fact. (Certain of our critics have emphasized our alleged "nastiness," I am convinced, as a way of distracting attention from our evidence and arguments.)

While thinking about these issues, I ran across a remarkable little essay in the remarkable journal *First Things*.⁶ Its author, James Nuechterlein, has faced the same question, "Why are you so polemical?" His answer is mine, as well. Such writing, such debate, such confrontation, he says, is not "everyone's vocation, and it is not the highest vocation, but it is inescapably ours. It would be disingenuous of us to pretend to an attitude of disinterestedness and neutrality in the culture wars that rage about us. . . . And it's hard to imagine that a journal of opinion that had no opinions would be of use or interest to anyone. Blandness in the pursuit of truth is no virtue."

Dr. Nuechterlein points out that polemical writing is not necessarily the kind that he would have chosen for himself or for his magazine. "We take no particular pleasure in engaging the militant feminists and homosexual activists, the Nietzschean deconstructionists and relativists, the enemies of traditional morality and religious faith; indeed, the ongoing conflict with our various utopians and Gnostics is dirty business from which no one emerges with entirely clean hands or uncoarsened sensibilities." This is precisely my attitude, and I am confident that it represents the attitude of most if not all of my colleagues. I am not, by native temperament, confrontational, and, with my associates, would rather write affirmatively. The gospel is an endlessly fascinating, rich, profound, and glorious subject, and it is more than a little tiresome, at times, to have to descend from its heights to reply to carping critics and to sworn, professional enemies of the Church. I have often felt like Nehemiah, when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arabian, hoping to delay or even to stop the building of Jerusalem's city wall, summoned him to a meeting for negotiations. "I am doing a great work," Nehemiah replied, "so

⁶ James Nuechterlein, "This Time: Life at the Intellectual Barricades," *First Things* 46 (October 1994): 12-13.

that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?" (Nehemiah 6:3).

The work of the Church is a far greater one than the building of any city wall. And I firmly believe that the kind of study of the scriptures represented by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies offers at least a small contribution to the work of the Church. But the attacks of the critics create casualties. (I think of my correspondent from abroad. I think of others, presumably far more numerous, who may be troubled but who do not write.) Sometimes it is necessary to climb down from the wall. Sometimes it is even necessary, as Nehemiah's construction workers did, to labor with one hand while the other holds a sword (see Nehemiah 4:13-23). "However regretfully," writes Dr. Nuechterlein, "it is indeed a culture war in which my colleagues and I find ourselves engaged, and it is worth emphasizing that this is a conflict not of our making. This is no rarefied battle of the books, no mere esoteric disagreement among obscure scribblers. Ideas, as they say, have consequences."

We who write for the *Review* have our own fields, in which we aspire to do good and creative work. Many of us hold responsible and time-consuming assignments in the Church. We would prefer to devote our sparse free time to seeking insights into the gospel and the restoration. Many of us have more ideas and research questions than we will ever find the time to develop. The negative work of criticism and, occasionally, of demolition, is something we approach with genuine reluctance. Again, James Nuechterlein expresses our feelings well:

We persist in the struggle because we think it is our simple duty to do so, and we frankly do not take it well that so many of our fellow intellectuals—who if they cannot join us in the struggle could at least offer moral support—prefer instead to strike ostentatiously Olympian poses above the fray and to chide us for our combative ways.

But we remind ourselves that self-pity is to be avoided, and we soldier on, armed (we hope) against self-righteousness by the knowledge that the God of history sits in judgment over all the combatants in the wars of the earthly city, siding unambiguously with none, offering his grace to all. Precisely because we know, with the writer to the Hebrews,

that we have here no abiding city, we are from time to time tempted to retire from the fray, to set our minds on higher and better things. But the evils of this world, so far as it is given us to discern them, are to be resisted, not merely endured. And there is, we pray, a measure of honor and dignity even in our grim vocation. So restraining our naturally irenic impulses, we return to the struggle with all the courage, wisdom, and ingenuity we can muster. It is, to repeat, a matter of duty.

And that is why—at least on occasion—we have to be so polemical.

The opinions expressed in this issue of the *Review*, like those in previous issues, are the opinions of the reviewers. They are not necessarily those of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or of the reviewers' employers. As always, I am grateful to the many individuals who helped in the production of this issue: Dr. Fred C. Pinnegar and Dr. William J. Hamblin offered valuable editorial assistance. Dr. Melvin J. Thorne did much of the real work of editing. Brent Hall was, as usual, helpful in numerous ways. Sandra Thorne got the submissions into publishable shape. And, of course, without the contributors, the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* would not exist at all. I wish to express my thanks, too, to the many who have expressed appreciation for the *Review*. They have always far outnumbered our critics, and their support is one of the most satisfying rewards we can enjoy.