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John W. Welch

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**Author(s)** John W. Welch

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**Abstract** *Review of New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (1993), edited by Brent Lee Metcalfe.

**Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*.**

## **Approaching New Approaches**

Reviewed by John W. Welch

Brent Metcalfe's publication of a collection of essays under the title *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* comes as a welcome invitation to look again at Book of Mormon studies. Collective understanding of the Book of Mormon is increasing as readers and writers consider again and again its contents and backgrounds, and reassess and refine the tools they use in interpreting and evaluating it. Students of the Book of Mormon have long recognized the need for all who work in this area to give clearer statements defining and explaining their methods.

In broad terms, three different methods seem to have emerged in recent years; they are described briefly by Stephen Ricks in his article on "Book of Mormon Studies" in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.<sup>1</sup> First, some scholars are exclusively interested in the doctrinal and practical religious messages of the book; of those scholars, some see the doctrines as eternal and unchanging, while others view the revelations as progressing and suited to the needs and circumstances of individual people and their historical settings. Second, other scholars pursue lines of research that explore possible ancient Near Eastern or ancient American backgrounds for the Book of Mormon; of such students, some approach the Book of Mormon as being predominantly Hebrew, while others look to ancient Near Eastern cultures surrounding the Israelites, and beyond. The third group of scholars examines the nineteenth-century world that formed the matrix out of which the translation of the Book of Mormon emerged. Some scholars in this group are satisfied with the conclusion that Joseph Smith was influenced by his nineteenth-century world only to a limited extent. Specifically, these schol-

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Ricks, "Book of Mormon Studies," in Daniel Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:208-9.

ars assert that Joseph Smith used contemporary vocabulary and King James idioms to communicate his inspired translation to a broad and enduring audience in terms that would best convey the meaning of the underlying record. Others in this third group presume that nineteenth-century ideas and culture exercised deeper influences on the essential fabric of the Book of Mormon. This presumption sometimes leads these scholars to conclude that the entire work was a product of Joseph Smith, either piously or fraudulently.

The foregoing approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Mixtures and combinations of these approaches can be created, either in regard to the entire Book of Mormon or to segments within it. Obviously, the study of the Book of Mormon has become and will undoubtedly remain a very complicated subject. This state of affairs suits the book, for it is itself very complex.

Notwithstanding the significant increase in Book of Mormon studies, little has been written in this field of study about methodology itself. The closest things to methodological expositions are Hugh Nibley's 1953-54 series entitled "New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study,"<sup>2</sup> and the introductions to books published by F.A.R.M.S.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, if the study of the Book of Mormon is to become a more rigorous discipline, all of its practitioners will need to become more explicit about their methods, their assumptions, their purposes, and the degree to which their conclusions are based on various forms of evidence or depend on various theoretical predilections.

For this reason, Metcalfe's volume comes at an auspicious time in the growth of Book of Mormon studies. *New Approaches* asks everyone involved in the field to think about some fundamental issues, formulate some clear statements of purpose and procedure, figure out what a proposed new approach really means, and decide whether that approach raises more questions and difficulties than it solves.

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<sup>2</sup> Hugh Nibley, "New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study," ran in the *Improvement Era* from November 1953 through July 1954, reprinted in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, vol. 8 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989), 54-126.

<sup>3</sup> For example, John W. Welch, "Why Study Warfare in the Book of Mormon?" in 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), 3-24; John W. Welch, *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1992), xi-xiv.

Unfortunately, one of the major shortcomings of *New Approaches* is its failure to define what it means by "critical methodology." This defect is not cured by Metcalfe's recent article in *Dialogue*.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it is impossible to extrapolate from this book what constitutes a "critical methodology," because its articles "address a variety of methodological, historical, and theological concerns" (p. xi) and pursue different lines of reasoning. Indeed, the articles seem to share little common methodological ground. The authors of the articles in this eclectic collection may well share some ultimate conclusion about the nature or value of the Book of Mormon, but one suspects that the authors have little in common concerning how to go about studying a text or drawing implications from academic research. Simply proclaiming one's approach to consist of a "rigorous, balanced scrutiny of texts" (p. ix), for example, does not, by itself, comprise a methodology. Indeed, most scholars consider themselves to be involved in the "rigorous, balanced scrutiny of texts." Each scholar, however, has his or her own way of accomplishing such a task. Moreover, there are many ways in which to allow "for the possibility that [the Book of Mormon] may be something other than literal history" (p. x). Perhaps useful definitions of what constitutes "critical methodology" will emerge in future studies. In the meantime, an unfulfilled burden of persuasion rests upon any authors who would have the Church or its members jettison basic approaches to the Book of Mormon that have been essentially accepted, propounded, and utilized for several generations by many scholars and authorities within the Church, in favor of a set of "new," amorphous, undefined, and untested approaches to the book.

When *New Approaches* first appeared early in the summer of 1993, a group of scholars held a brief meeting to discuss its contents. Some felt that the book deserved little or no comment, because its approach was hardly new and most Latter-day Saint readers would be intelligent enough to analyze the issues and the obvious implications for themselves. (*New Approaches* is not a subtle book.) Others at the meeting saw wisdom in providing detailed comments on the errors, unsupported assumptions, and unanswered questions in the volume. Personally, I was not interested in spending many hours or scarce resources in

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<sup>4</sup> Brent L. Metcalfe, "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity," *Dialogue* 26/3 (Fall 1993): 154-84.

preparing a response. I figured that the collective impact of *New Approaches'* articles would not be much greater than when most of them individually appeared over the prior decade. Furthermore, I suspected that general readers would have little interest in this volume as a whole and less interest in our responses in particular. But in the interest of not being held liable in the minds of some on a default judgment for failure to file an answer, I will offer some general comments, then several specific points regarding the chapters by Stan Larson and David Wright, and a few concluding observations.

### General Comments

*New Approaches*, like several books published by Signature Books, is poorly titled. My first reaction was to see the title as a Nibley rip-off. Nibley published a long series in the *Improvement Era* in 1953–54 entitled “New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study,” which was reprinted in 1989.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Nibley’s widely circulated 1957 Melchizedek Priesthood manual, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, was reprinted in its third edition in 1988.<sup>6</sup> Typically, authors try to avoid trading on the names and titles of others. In the business world, laws prohibit businesses from using business names that might be misleading to the public because they are too close to names already in use. Although I realize that we are not dealing with a registered corporate name or trademark here, I believe that the principles behind those laws are relevant.

Second, as I looked at the book’s contents, I was disappointed by the word “new” in the title. There wasn’t much new here. Several of the chapters are largely rewrites of things published before, and most of the strategies employed to argue that Joseph Smith was the Book of Mormon’s author have been around since the first anti-Book of Mormon publication by Alexander Campbell in 1831.

Now, after further reflection, I have come to see *New Approaches* in another light. Rather than a “new” approach, I simply find here a “terrestrial approach.” Joseph Smith saw

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<sup>5</sup> Nibley, “New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study,” in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 54–126.

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3d ed., vol. 6 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988).

among those who will inherit the terrestrial kingdom people “who receive of [Christ’s] glory, but not of his fulness” (D&C 76:76), who “are not valiant in the testimony of Jesus” (D&C 76:79), who are the “honorably men of the earth, who were blinded by the craftiness of men” (D&C 76:75). I find these descriptions apposite here. Some of the writers in *New Approaches* may well be honorable and may have worked hard in an effort to reconcile the religious value of the Book of Mormon with their primary commitments to certain academic assumptions and methods, but in the process I think they have been blinded by the theories of men. I do not imply that scholarship is necessarily blinding and crafty, but in some cases it can be. The “new” approaches offered in this book seem to me to glorify the Book of Mormon in part, to speak well of it in certain respects; but such concessions do not receive of its fullness. *New Approaches* makes less of God’s role in the writing, preservation and translation of the Book of Mormon than he deserves. While I cannot and do not speak about the private religious views of these authors themselves (and I do not mean to judge or impugn them personally), I worry that it will be hard to describe as “valiant in the testimony of Jesus” any person who uses perfectly good scholarly tools to produce the terrestrial results promulgated by this book. Like any other kinds of tools, scholarship can be used to build up, to tear down, or to remodel. I believe it is always fair to ask if the construction work in question is celestial, terrestrial, or otherwise in nature.

Perhaps the time will come when the world is so wicked and the situation so hopeless that God will tell the Church to stop striving for the celestial glory and work to harvest as much terrestrial fruit from the vineyard as is possible. I do not hope for such a day, however, and I see no basis in prophecy for it. Perhaps in such a hypothetical day, a terrestrial approach to the Book of Mormon, along with terrestrial approaches to marriage, morality, honesty, philosophy, and spirituality, would be helpful. But as long as the Saints are commissioned to preach and live the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, anything less than a celestial approach to the Book of Mormon falls short of the mark.

Some of the people involved in the writing, editing, publishing, and marketing of *New Approaches* may take offense at the suggestion that they have produced less than a celestial book. Others of them, however, may be gleeful at the prospect, reject-

ing the Latter-day Saint concept of celestial glory in any event. Because past experience shows, however, that religious overtones in responses to works published by Signature Books can lead to embroilments and indignation, I hasten to add that I do not see this book as telestial. I gladly acknowledge that the image of Korihor—the telestial image—does not fit in one respect: Korihor, by his own admission, was visited by the devil and did his express bidding (Alma 30:53). Thus, the comparison is not exact between books like this one and Korihor.

Ultimately, I believe, neither the Bible nor the Book of Mormon can be proved or disproved by textual or historical evidence. Circumstantial evidence can be produced both for and against Joseph Smith's testimony that the Book of Mormon "is not by any means a modern composition, either of mine or of any other man who has lived or does live in this generation."<sup>7</sup> The case will not, however, be completely resolved at the present time in a court of academic research, for the methodological engine to drive a conclusion on this issue cannot be agreed upon. If one suspicious mistake proves the book wrong, it is equally logical for one remarkable coincidence to prove it true.

The articles in *New Approaches* typically discount all evidence in favor of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon, as if such evidence counts for little or nothing. At the same time, the articles overstate or overemphasize evidence against the book's antiquity. I suppose those who have written in favor of the Book of Mormon can be accused of doing the opposite. I, for one, began my work on the Book of Mormon at a time when hardly anything positive had been written—from a scholarly point of view—about its antiquity. I believed the balance needed to be tipped back by looking for, finding, and saying things in favor of the book.

Still today, I feel no need to get too excited when I see things that might be used as evidence against the book's antiquity. Instead, I take note and begin researching the subject. Usually, as I learn more, I come to see other options and find that what I originally thought was a problem is not. Indeed, sometimes what I thought was a problematic detail turns out to be a strength. For example, Krister Stendahl once claimed that the Book of Mormon is wrong to say "they shall be *filled* with the Holy Ghost" (3 Nephi 12:6). Stendahl made this claim because,

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<sup>7</sup> HC 1:71.



he said, the Greek word behind this beatitude in Matthew 5, namely *chortazo*, cannot mean to be filled "with the Holy Ghost" but means to "fill the stomach."<sup>8</sup> Hutchinson (p. 14, where the Greek is misspelled) and others have used this as a prime exhibit of an alleged Book of Mormon mistake. For over ten years, I figured that the best that one could say on behalf of the Book of Mormon in this instance was that it was simply expressing the image of the Holy Ghost more literally than the Protestant Stendahl would allow. That explanation was sufficient for me, but I remained aware of Stendahl's linguistic criticism. Then, I found in the Septuagint an ancient text that used *chortazo* to mean being filled with the spirit, being satiated with the likeness of God (Psalm 17:15). This is a text that Stendahl had apparently missed. I published this finding in 1990,<sup>9</sup> which makes me wonder why Hutchinson continues to push Stendahl's point, when it is now known to be erroneous (unless I am missing something). Now, as a result of this excursion, I see the Book of Mormon translation in 3 Nephi 12:6 as stronger than ever, for it is consistent with an ancient usage of *chortazo* that even one of the learned men of the world had overlooked. Moreover, it is consonant with a unique point of Mormon doctrine that spirit is matter, meaning that one can indeed be physically filled with the spirit's substance.

The writers in *New Approaches* go out of their way to point out that evidence in favor of the Book of Mormon is not as strong as some might have claimed. If certain evidence is overstated, the writers are correct to say so and offer a better assessment. This does not mean, however, that such evidence should be minimized or ignored.

Originally, and still today, I am very satisfied in my testimony of the Book of Mormon. I believed at first that it was true with little or no evidence at all, and I never expected to find much. I subscribe to the saying, "Happy is he who expects little, for he shall not be disappointed." I guess that is why I am so pleased with each bit of evidence that comes along. I believe that many significant insights into the antiquity of the Book of

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<sup>8</sup> Krister Stendahl, "The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi," in Truman Madsen, ed., *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaean-Christian Parallels* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 142.

<sup>9</sup> John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 114–15.

Mormon have appeared and will continue to do so. When such evidences come to light, I think it is fair to point them out. I hope that my colleagues and I have always been cautious in presenting such evidence. We do not intend to overstate the case, but we do not want to understate it either. Furthermore, as more and more information is accumulated, we should hopefully be able to offer more accurate and more complete descriptions of every feature of the Book of Mormon text.

I am grateful to the authors of *New Approaches* for making some points that have value to me. For example, I appreciate the need to look carefully at the evidence. Whenever I have made a mistake (as all humans are prone to do), I am eager to correct the record. If I have overlooked a persuasive line of reasoning, I am happy to entertain new possibilities that help me to understand the full text and its ancient and modern contexts better. Even the good branches of the olive tree need to be trimmed periodically. By the same token, where I find errors of fact, method, or judgment in the works of others, I will not hesitate to point them out or to call them into question. While the wheat and the tares are allowed to grow together in the field of the world, within the House of Israel a different metaphor applies: branches that produce bad fruit are cut off and cast into the fire.

### **Matthew 5–7 and 3 Nephi 12–14**

In chapter 5 of *New Approaches* Stan Larson, in his article “The Historicity of the Matthean Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi,” questions the historicity of the text of 3 Nephi 12–14. This is not a new issue. Since the 1830s, the Sermon on the Mount has been considered by critics to be the Achilles heel of the Book of Mormon. In 1985, Stan Larson prepared his first article on the Greek manuscripts of the Sermon on the Mount and 3 Nephi. On September 30, 1985, I sent him a memo reviewing a prepublication draft of that article. In 1986, Larson’s article was published—with slight modifications—in *Trinity Journal*.<sup>10</sup> I then addressed his arguments, directly and indirectly, throughout my *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (1990), especially in chapter 8 of that book. Larson’s 1993 publication is essentially a recapitulation

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<sup>10</sup> Stan Larson, “The Sermon on the Mount: What Its Textual Transformation Discloses Concerning the Historicity of the Book of Mormon,” *Trinity Journal* N.S. (1986): 23–45.

and elaboration of the 1986 article. His basic argument is that, while the earliest Greek manuscripts of Matthew 5–7 overwhelmingly agree with the King James Version of that text, in a few places they do not. In each of these cases, Larson argues that the Book of Mormon is wrong to present the same reading as one finds in the English King James Bible. (Larson first proposed twelve such points of certain and indicative disagreement, then in his 1986 article he included eleven, and in his latest study he drops the number to eight. In my opinion, he is moving in the right direction.)

*Methodological Assumptions and Problems.* Larson reaches the wrong result for two main reasons: (1) he is overly confident that anyone can know for sure from the surviving Greek manuscripts how the original Greek of Matthew might relate to the Book of Mormon text; and (2) he is unwilling to admit that, at least in seven of his cases,<sup>11</sup> the ancient textual variants in question are not significantly different in meaning. These two main problems preclude Larson's approach from fulfilling its objective, which is to determine whether Joseph Smith's translation of the eight passages in question is right or wrong.

Larson is confident that he can identify eight places where errors, revisions, and additions have crept into the KJV. At the beginning of his study, Larson tries to avoid overstating his point. He suggests that his research allows one to "make *tentative* judgments about whether the Book of Mormon stands up to the tests of historicity" (p. 117, emphasis added), and initially admits that "establishing the 'original' text of Matthew's version of the sermon is a problematic process" (p. 117). By the end of his chapter, however, Larson has forgotten the tentative origins and necessarily uncertain nature of his exploration. He ultimately ignores the uncertainties inherent in this problematic endeavor.<sup>12</sup>

Larson sees the comparison of the English translation in 3 Nephi with the English translation in the King James Bible as "an ideal test of the Book of Mormon as a real translation of an ancient text" (p. 116). In many ways, however, the test is less than ideal. For example, the test would be better if one had the original Aramaic, its original translation into Greek, the original Nephite record, Mormon's transcription of that record onto the

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<sup>11</sup> All except perhaps the doxology at the end of the Lord's Prayer, for which I offer other explanations.

<sup>12</sup> For example, he speaks as if he absolutely knows which phrase was or was not "in the original text of Matthew 5:27" (p. 121).

plates of Mormon, and the corresponding portions missing from the original manuscript of Joseph Smith's dictation. If such documents were available, scholars would be in a position to compare the earliest recorded versions of Jesus' words in the Old World with the words recorded in the New World. Even these documents, however, would not provide a tape recording of Jesus' words. Nevertheless, the documents could be compared to determine the accuracy of various translations of the Old and New World records. The ancient documentary history and the 1829 translation process that produced the Book of Mormon are complex subjects that Larson's ideal test oversimplifies.

Larson's approach rests on several implicit assumptions about the Greek texts: for example, (1) that two different readings in the early Greek manuscripts cannot *both* have originated as translations of a single authentic Aramaic saying of Jesus; (2) that Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount once and only once, or each time identically; (3) that Jesus' original Aramaic words in all cases corresponded with the "better" Greek manuscripts that happen to have survived; and (4) that the original Greek version of Matthew was a minutely precise word-for-word translation of the Aramaic spoken by Jesus. I doubt that assumptions such as these are provable. No one knows enough about New Testament origins to speak with absolute confidence on these matters.

Larson's approach also assumes that the words Jesus spoke to the Nephites were identical to what he said to his disciples in Judea and Galilee at the eight points being tested.<sup>13</sup> Jesus, however, gave these two sermons to different audiences; he need not have said exactly the same thing each time. This point should be kept in mind, especially with respect to the different endings used in the Lord's Prayer: Jesus need not have ended every prayer the same way. While substantial similarities exist between the Sermon in Matthew and in 3 Nephi, many substantial differences exist as well.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Larson says that Matthew 5-7 and 3 Nephi 12-15 "record a single sermon delivered by Jesus on two separate occasions" (p. 116).

<sup>14</sup> Larson considers the Book of Mormon to have copied the KJV "blindly," but he recognizes that it is not a "slavish copy" (p. 132). This is a grudging concession. For a discussion of the differences between the two sermons and the sophistication, historical appropriateness, subtlety, and significance of the differences, see my *Sermon at the Temple*, chapter 5. I think there is more going on here than blind copying that is not slavish.

Larson's method assumes that great certainty can be obtained by examining these eight details. As I argue in *Sermon at the Temple*,<sup>15</sup> the overall setting of 3 Nephi 11–18 is also important in accessing the differences between and meanings of the Matthean material that parallels the words of Jesus in 3 Nephi 12–14.<sup>16</sup> In that study, I offer what seem to me to be plausible answers to the problems raised by Larson and others regarding the Sermon on the Mount. I also provide a new way of viewing the presence of that material embedded in 3 Nephi 11–18, suggesting that it can be seen in a sacred ritual context. Rather than being a clumsy or embarrassing plagiarism, the presence of the Sermon on the Mount in the words of Jesus at the temple in Bountiful can be seen as a coherent strength for the Book of Mormon. Although I do not expect to win votes for the authenticity of 3 Nephi 11–18 from members of the Jesus Seminar, I have tried to approach the text of the Book of Mormon through careful scholarly techniques consistent with Latter-day Saint concepts. The fact that the larger setting is irrelevant to the points that Larson tries to make is a signal that he undertakes to examine too little of the evidence. The issues encompass a larger picture than the one he has framed. I hope that readers who are interested in this topic will consider the arguments I advance in my book. I will not take the time to restate them here.

Larson's approach rests further on several assumptions about the nature of Joseph's English translation.<sup>17</sup> But scholars simply do not know enough about the translation process itself to be confident about the "test" Larson seeks to perform. Larson tries to enlist support in this regard by using quotations from B. H. Roberts, Sidney B. Sperry, and Hugh W. Nibley, who supposedly make unwitting concessions that bolster Larson's approach. For example, he claims Sperry believed that if the Book of Mormon failed to make any corrections of textual corruptions or errors that have accumulated in the biblical manuscripts over the centuries, then the Book of Mormon

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<sup>15</sup> See Welch, *Sermon at the Temple*, chapters 1–3.

<sup>16</sup> Larson incorrectly claims that "Jesus ended his sermon" at 3 Nephi 15:1 (p. 115). Contrary to Larson's assertion, the sermon continues—with its accompanying ordinances and instructions—until the end of 3 Nephi 18.

<sup>17</sup> Larson briefly discusses how Joseph Smith may have translated the Book of Mormon. He emphasizes the opinions of some who have seen more room for Joseph Smith's direct and mechanical use of the Bible than I do. For my discussion of the translation process, see Welch, *Sermon at the Temple*, chapter 7.

“ ‘should be thrown out of court’ ” (p. 116). I wonder, however, if Larson gives a fair reading of Sperry. Sperry is simply presenting the arguments that “a Biblical expert might venture,”<sup>18</sup> not stating a position that he considered an absolute test of the Book of Mormon’s historicity. Sperry, for example, knew that the Book of Mormon agreed substantially with the King James Version of Isaiah (he points out that 199 verses are word-for-word the same as the old English version), and he was satisfied that some of the changes made by Joseph Smith in translating the Isaiah texts found support in *some* other ancient versions (even if not the best ancient versions). But I doubt that Sperry would have agreed with Larson’s litmus test, for Sperry was satisfied to view the Nephite scripture as an independent text, even though it only “finds support *at times* for its unusual readings in the ancient Greek, Syriac, and Latin versions, and at other times no support at all.”<sup>19</sup>

Similar observations can be made with respect to Roberts and Nibley. For example, Roberts does not lock himself into the position that Joseph Smith purported to give a translation that corresponded word-for-word with the underlying manuscript. Rather, Roberts believed that Jesus presented to the Nephites “great truths in the same *forms* of expression he had used in teaching the Jews, so that *in substance* what he had taught as his doctrines in Judea he would repeat in America.”<sup>20</sup> Hence, according to Roberts, when Joseph thought that the words on the Nephite record and in the King James Bible “*in substance*, in thought, . . . were alike, he adopted our English translation.”<sup>21</sup>

In connection with the question of the nature of the Book of Mormon translation, Larson introduces a claim that has been heard before, namely that Joseph Smith “often revises biblical quotations at the very point where the original 1611 [or 1769] edition of the KJV prints the word or words in a different type-face” (p. 130), thus showing Joseph’s dependence on a printed King James text. This thesis, however, has been drawn in ques-

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<sup>18</sup> Sidney B. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1950), 171.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 177 (emphasis added).

<sup>20</sup> B. H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1907), 1:272 (emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

tion.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the italicized words in the Sermon on the Mount, the evidence is inconclusive.<sup>23</sup>

The main thrust of Larson's argument, however, is that "coincidental agreement is ruled out [and plagiarism established] when two documents have the same telltale *mistakes*" (p. 117, emphasis added). This statement is true, but only if one can prove that the translations in question are "mistakes." Larson fails to do so, as I have argued before.<sup>24</sup> In substance, as will now be further discussed below, both the King James translations and the Book of Mormon readings are not demonstrably wrong.

*The Eight Deadly Errors.* Larson argues that improper dependence of the Book of Mormon on the KJV is "strong evidence against [the Book of Mormon's] historicity" because the Book of Mormon "should know nothing of changes and additions to the Sermon on the Mount made in the Old World centuries after the original sermon" (p. 117). As I show in chapter 8 of my book, this argument is only as strong as the individual cases of alleged errors. Specifically, because the difference in meaning between the variant Greek texts is negligible, one has little hope of knowing which Greek version was most similar to the text on the plates that Joseph Smith translated.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See the review by Royal Skousen, in this volume, pages 122–46.

<sup>23</sup> I count 13 italicized words in 12 verses in the 1611 text of Matthew 5–7, and 36 such words in 28 verses in a typical nineteenth-century Bible (1815). There are 105 verses in the Sermon on the Mount. In 69 of those verses, 3 Nephi 12–14 differs from Matthew 5–7. Of those 69 verses where differences are found, 8 verses contain italicized words, but the differences do not always involve the italicized words. Only 7 italicized words are different in the Book of Mormon sermon. In most of these cases the difference is minor and optional with a translator (e.g., "shall be" for "is"; "cometh of more" for "is more"; "your" for "thine"), and are the kinds of differences found throughout. Five of the 28 verses that contain italicized words are absent from or very different in the Book of Mormon text. In the remaining 15 of those 28 verses, the Book of Mormon and New Testament texts are the same.

<sup>24</sup> See Welch, *Sermon at the Temple*, chapter 8.

<sup>25</sup> Some Book of Mormon phrases may not be translated as precisely as Larson would like, but can they be said to be mistaken, as Larson's historicity test requires? If Joseph Smith had been slightly more precise, he might have seized an opportunity to show that he was indeed working from a text independent of and slightly different from the early Greek manuscripts of the Sermon on the Mount, but if both translations are acceptable possibilities, Joseph Smith did not make a mistake.

*Example 1.* Larson claims that the phrase “by them of old time” (*tois archaiois*), which appears in 3 Nephi 12:27, was not in the original text of Matthew 5:27 (p. 121; compare Matthew 5:21, 31, 33, 38). Larson has not shown, however, that a translator would be wrong to add this phrase for clarity (even if it were not present in every occurrence of the repeated pattern in Matthew 5). The sense clearly allows the phrase in a translation of Matthew 5:33. Thus, the presence or absence of “by them of old time” cannot be used to condemn the Book of Mormon as a mistranslation. Furthermore, Larson ignores the fact that the phrase “by them of old time” does *not* appear in 3 Nephi 12:33, whereas it *does* appear in the Greek and in the King James Version of Matthew 5:33, but this shows that the presence or absence of this phrase in these verses is not crucially rigid.

Larson’s 1993 study adds one new and interesting claim, namely that *tois archaiois* must be translated “to them of old,” instead of “by them of old.” He considers the translation “by them of old” to be “clearly a mistranslation” (p. 121). But what Greek scholars would bet their lives on absolutely knowing what kind of dative appears here, or what the underlying Aramaic was? While the dative of agent (indicating by whom) in classical Greek is *usually* found with passive verbs in the perfect or pluperfect tense,<sup>26</sup> such is not always the case. Ultimately, how does one know what kind of dative should be understood in *tois archaiois*? The context tells much, and in 3 Nephi 12:27 the sense amply allows a dative of agent.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Larson has improperly minimized the significance of the fact that the KJV verb *said* appears in these sayings as *written* in the Book of Mormon. In 3 Nephi, this passage reads “written by them of old time” as opposed to “written to them of old time.” The latter would make poor sense in English. Moreover, might one not assume (for the sake of argument) that the word Jesus used for *written* was the equivalent of a perfect or pluperfect, and hence the expression would have contained a genuine dative of agent like that found in Luke 23:15 (which Larson gives as a clear example of a dative of agent)?

Larson discounts the foregoing by claiming that “if one were to suggest that the Book of Mormon speaks of what was *written*

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<sup>26</sup> Herbert W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 343–44.

<sup>27</sup> Ignoring for the sake of argument that Hebrew or Aramaic grammar follows different rules in any event.



by people of old and not what was *said* to them, it merely underscores the impression that the Book of Mormon represents a reaction to the English KJV text" (p. 121). I fail to follow this logic. It appears that after Larson discovered what he thought to be a mistranslation, he recognized that his point was undermined by the presence of the word *written* in 3 Nephi 12:27. Rather than discard his point as not compelling, he tried to salvage it with a case of special pleading. By doing this, however, Larson in effect recognizes that with *tois archaiois* he has not produced a mistranslation in the Book of Mormon, but simply a case of mere "reaction" to the English King James text. This, however, is not what he has promised to deliver. Larson has promised to deliver mistranslations, telltale mistakes. Example one fails as such a case.

*Example 2.* Next, Larson argues that the Book of Mormon wrongly contains the phrase "cast into hell" rather than "go into hell" in 3 Nephi 12:30 (where other, more extensive differences from Matthew 5:30 also appear). In making this argument, Larson ignores evidence from Mark 9:43–45 (which I have previously presented) showing that these two phrases were used "synonymously and concurrently" by the earliest Christians.<sup>28</sup> Larson also ignores the fact that Matthew Black, a fine New Testament scholar, prefers the originality of "cast into hell" because it sounds more natural in the Aramaic.<sup>29</sup> Given the small differences here (which concern only one Greek word, *apelthei* or *blethei*), this example cannot bear much weight—as Larson seems to acknowledge—but at most "suggests that the Book of Mormon follows the KJV" (pp. 122–23, emphasis added).

*Example 3.* Example 3 concerns the difference between "measured to you" (which appears in older Matthean texts) and "measured to you *again*" (which appears in KJV Matthew 7:2 and 3 Nephi 14:2). Larson says that I "downplay the difference among the variants at Matthew 7:2" (p. 123). He does not say, however, why I find the difference to be negligible. The difference is over the presence or absence of the Greek prefix *anti-* (English *again*). I believe that "with or without this prefix on the

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<sup>28</sup> Welch, *Sermon at the Temple*, 149.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 171, cited in Welch, *Sermon at the Temple*, 149.

verb, the sentence means exactly the same thing.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the similarity is such that “this variant was not considered significant enough to be noted in the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament.”<sup>31</sup>

Larson tries to salvage his point by arguing that “it can usually (but not always) be shown what Greek text the Latin, Syriac, and Coptic versions were based upon” and “it is often such fine distinctions that are clues in textual criticism” (p. 123). But if one were to imagine a world in which no Greek manuscripts of the New Testament existed, scholars would not stake their reputations on claiming to know for sure (given the clear sense of the passage) whether *antimetretesetai* or *metretesetai* stood behind an English translation that renders Matthew 7:2 as “measured again.” Similarly, one cannot be sure what Aramaic verb originally was used here or what version of a Nephite verb stood on the plates of Mormon behind the translation “measured again.” In light of the fact that Luke 6:38 contains the word *antimetretesetai* (“measured again”), is there any reason not to believe that early Christians used the words *antimetretesetai* and *metretesetai* interchangeably? Larson has not shown that this is one of those cases where one can determine from the translation what the underlying text was, or that this is one of those “fine distinctions” of textual analysis (because there is virtually no distinction in meaning here). If no difference exists, Larson has not proved that 3 Nephi 14:2 is in error.

*Example 4.* Example 4 deals with Matthew 5:44. I have already proposed explanations for the fact that certain older Matthean texts do not contain the lengthier phrases (phrases that appear in the KJV) found in 3 Nephi 12:44.<sup>32</sup> Larson blithely dismisses my arguments by quipping, “certainly it is possible to believe almost anything” (p. 124). Larson’s view, however, now requires additional reexamination in light of the fact that early Hebrew versions of Matthew 5:44 contain the phrase that Larson rejects, as John Gee points out in his review elsewhere in this volume.<sup>33</sup>

In this example 4, one can also see an instance of how Larson misuses the writings of others. In my book, I deal with

<sup>30</sup> Welch, *Sermon at the Temple*, 155.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 155–56.

<sup>33</sup> See the review by John Gee, in this volume, pages 68–72.

Matthew 5:44 as Larson's seventh example (his 1986 order). Finding it to be the first even interesting point (before I knew of the evidence produced by Gee), I made the following comment: "For those who might see this point here to be more of a problem for the Book of Mormon than the other cases, one should be aware that the textual evidence is not as strong in this instance as it is in the other [Larson] examples."<sup>34</sup> Larson turns this statement into an "acknowledgment" on my part "that there are 'those who might see this point here to be more of a problem for the Book of Mormon' than the other examples" (p. 124). To readers who have not read my original statement, Larson gives an erroneous impression.

*Examples 5–7.* These cases concern Matthew 6:4, 6, and 18. All of these examples concern the same problem, namely the appearance of the phrase "reward openly" in 3 Nephi and KJV Matthew. Early Matthean texts do not contain the adverb. As I have previously argued, the meaning of these verses is that "God will openly reward the righteous with treasures in heaven on the judgment day."<sup>35</sup> In this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about laying up treasures in heaven. On the day of final judgment, all secret deeds will be made known, and the Father will reward all people openly.

As I have argued before (and as Larson ignores), the prefix *apo* on the word *apodidomi* already conveys the sense of "out from"; the openness of the reward is implicit in the verb itself. Larson cites Clark in support of the texts that drop the word "openly," thinking that God's reward will be as quiet and as secret as the deed itself, the reward being an inner feeling of peace, or something similar (p. 125). No evidence suggests, however, that the historical Jesus saw the kingdom, the judgment day, or the rewards of God in such a quiet or soft modern theological sense.

*Example 8.* This is the familiar issue of whether the Lord's Prayer ended with the word "Amen" or with the longer doxology, "for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen." Early Matthean texts do not contain the doxology, while KJV Matthew and 3 Nephi do. Larson turns to my 1976 *Ensign* article about the prayers of Jesus to accuse me of circular logic. The point of that article, however, was entirely

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<sup>34</sup> Welch, *Sermon at the Temple*, 156.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

different, and the article was written to and by people who accepted the Book of Mormon as evidence of the sayings of Jesus. Larson also quotes my unpublished and private communication to him in 1985, using it as evidence that I believe that the fixed form of the doxology probably did not develop until fifty years after the Gospel of Matthew was written (p. 126). What I actually said on page 14 of my memo was the following:

Thus Stan, p. 38, in his criticism of Nibley for not quoting all of Jeremias, appears himself to be guilty of misquoting Jeremias on this point. One may well argue that no liberty was taken with the text [by some early Christians] to add *some* doxology, although a *fixed* form (no doubt chosen from among some prevalent options) may not have emerged until 50 or so years after the Gospel of Matthew was written (the *Didache* which contains doxologies close to the doxology as we know it and is earlier than any of the texts of Matthew which we have). Thus, if there was originally *some* doxology in the Palestinian prayer, and if the received doxology is a likely candidate, of what problem is it to believe that Jesus also added that doxology in Bountiful and that it got written down that way (even though perhaps the Palestinians took the ending for granted and did not record it because it was assumed that everyone would know to add it or something like it automatically)?

Larson discounts the evidence from the very early *Didache* (c. A.D. 100, earlier than any New Testament manuscript) mainly because it does not conform precisely with the traditional doxology (p. 151). The doxology in the *Didache* reads, "For thine is the power and glory forever." Readers may judge for themselves whether this is evidence that Jesus may have said something like the ending of his prayer in 3 Nephi 6:13.

On page 155, Larson misstates my argument. He claims that I argue "that the doxology was originally present in Matthew 6:13" (p. 155). I actually state: "Whether the phrase was originally present in the text of Matthew cannot be known."<sup>36</sup> The point of my argument was simply that "no one seems to doubt that Jesus probably pronounced a doxology at the end of his

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 158.

prayers; the only question is how early such a thing found its way into the text of the Gospel of Matthew."<sup>37</sup>

Regarding the longer doxology at the end of the Lord's Prayer, Larson simply states that he finds my arguments "unconvincing." In doing so, however, he does not look beyond the evidence of the textual variants in the Greek manuscripts. In my book, I present an alternative theory for consideration, namely that the longer doxology would be appropriate in a sacred setting with an inner circle of followers, whereas the shorter ending (as in the Lucan prayer) is more appropriate in the open field addressing an "audience of the people" (the crowd, *laos*, Luke 7:1). I have offered evidence that in a more sacred setting, Jews "did not simply answer 'Amen!' How did one answer? 'Praised be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and eternally!'"<sup>38</sup> Although I have advanced this idea only as a possibility (one that has not occurred to any other New Testament scholar, as far as I am aware), the suggestion that the Lord's Prayer or other prayers of Jesus may have ended with various forms of doxology or closing formulae seems worthy of consideration.

That's it. That's the sum of Larson's eight examples, his "secure examples."<sup>39</sup> I do not believe he has made his case.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* I wonder if it is true that no manuscript of Matthew ever omits a word in order to agree with Luke. And while the textual process may be clearly in the direction of a fuller text once the texts are in place, is it possible that the oral sayings and traditions were more complicated and fuller than the first written version, which was then augmented from the oral tradition? I am willing to leave some of these questions as unresolved and probably unresolvable.

<sup>38</sup> Welch, *Sermon at the Temple*, 65; see also 157–61.

<sup>39</sup> Larson's pages 134–56 are essentially an extended footnote giving the reasons why New Testament scholars have concluded, in Larson's eight cases, which is the better reading. While it is helpful for general readers to have this explanation of the information from the textual apparatus, focusing on this data misses the point. No one doubts that any of the eight textual examples have very strong support in the earliest manuscripts. The question is, what conclusions can one draw from this evidence? I generally point out the insignificance in meaning of these textual differences, but I do not challenge their strength in the earliest Greek manuscripts. The fact that Larson misunderstands this point is illustrated on page 141, where he objects to the fact that I find the difference between "measure" and "measure again" not significant enough to have been included in the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament. Larson's response is that they were not included because they were so absolutely certain. My point, however, goes beyond that issue and asks what the words mean.

Based on these slender threads (and three more cases which he has jettisoned),<sup>40</sup> he previously concluded that

All of these considerations *force* one to place the origin of the BOM account of the sermon on the mount on the historical time-line somewhere after 1769 and before 1830 when the BOM was published . . . that the BOM text of the sermon on the mount is not a genuine translation from an ancient language, but rather Joseph Smith's nineteenth century targumic expansion of the English KJV text, . . . [that] the BOM blindly follows the KJV at the precise point where the KJV falls into error due to mistranslating the Greek or translating late and derivative Greek texts.<sup>41</sup>

His 1993 conclusion is similar: "The Book of Mormon account of Jesus' sermon in 3 Nephi 12-14 originated in the nineteenth century, derived from unacknowledged plagiarism of the KJV" (p. 132). But Larson has shown no instance of mis-translation. In addition, his terms "late and derivative" overstate his case, because even the weaker variants at issue did not first spring into existence in 1769 or so late as Larson implies.

*The Fly in Larson's Ointment.* One of my favorite textual points in the Sermon on the Mount remains the absence in

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<sup>40</sup> The three examples dropped by Larson are his (1) his old example 3 from Matthew 6:1 (see the argument that the Semitic words for "righteousness" and "almsgiving" are almost identical, in my *Sermon at the Temple*, 150); (2) his old example 4 from Matthew 6:5, about the use of "you" (plural and singular; see my previous arguments about the appropriateness of either in *Sermon at the Temple*, 151-53); and (3) his old example 5 from Matthew 6:12, about the difference between the present tense and the aorist tense of the verb "to forgive" (here is another case where it is impossible to tell from the English translation what the original Greek or Aramaic was; *Sermon at the Temple*, 153-55). Larson gives no reason why he drops these three cases. Apparently they met his textual criteria for inclusion, but in fact were meaningless differences. If he dropped them on that ground, I view that as an important concession that meaning in fact matters. But, on that ground, one must question his retention of all of his examples, except perhaps the longer ending of the Lord's Prayer, which I believe can be adequately explained on other grounds.

Larson's twelfth example, dropped in 1986, came from Matthew 5:32, where the texts variously read "each who," "he who," "whoever," and "whosoever," all of which are virtually synonymous. Compare also 3 Nephi 14:24 "whoso," and Matthew 7:24 "whosoever."

<sup>41</sup> Larson, "The Sermon on the Mount," 42-43.

3 Nephi 12:22 of the KJV Matthew phrase “without a cause.” On this occasion, one encounters quite strong textual evidence that the Book of Mormon contains the same reading that New Testament scholars believe represents the original saying of Jesus.<sup>42</sup>

Larson, however, is too stingy to count this point for anything. Certainly, it counts for something. He claims that this example does not meet the criteria used to select his eight examples, but one wonders if he has designed his criteria specifically to exclude this otherwise very close case. Larson’s criteria require that for a Greek reading to be secure, it must be included without brackets in his list of ten printed New Testament editions.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the reading “must also have support from the earliest and best Greek manuscripts, from each of the three earliest translations, and from a pre-Nicean patristic writer” (p. 120). Larson narrows the criteria further by accepting as “the earliest and best Greek manuscripts” only those readings found in Papyrus 64; the two oldest uncial codices of the fourth century; Family 1 of the minuscules (10th to 14th centuries); and in the Latin, Syriac, and Coptic New Testaments.

Larson does not adequately explain why his criteria should be absolutely defined in this way. This point is important because Larson’s criteria lead him to exclude Matthew 5:22 as a secure reading. Larson excludes Matthew 5:22 because (1) one of his ten editions (Augustinus Merk) puts “without a cause” in brackets in the text, although Larson acknowledges that Merk retains it in the text and that the nine others include it without brackets; and (2) it has no support from Family 1 (the medieval minuscules) or (3) from a Syriac or Coptic translation.

Notwithstanding Larson’s criteria, there is plenty of evidence for the omission of “without a cause” (as I have set forth in my book) from numerous texts. These include the earliest New Testament manuscript, P64;<sup>44</sup> the two oldest uncials; the

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<sup>42</sup> I discuss this in *Sermon at the Temple*, 161–63.

<sup>43</sup> In 1986 Larson accepted eleven New Testament editions. He does not explain why he dropped down to ten in 1993, but this shows that his criteria are fluid enough to include or exclude one here or one there. Obviously, there is a risk of manipulating such criteria to produce a desired result.

<sup>44</sup> I apologize if anyone was confused by my mentioning both P64 and P67 in my book. These sigla refer, as Larson rightly points out, to two fragments of the same manuscript: P64 is relevant to Matthew 5:25, and P67 to Matthew 5:22.

Latin Vulgate (with Jerome's testimony that the phrase was not found in the earliest manuscripts known to him); many other early Latin and Greek Christian writers; the Ethiopic texts; the Gospel of the Nazarenes; and other early texts.<sup>45</sup>

I have not checked the original in the Syriac or the Coptic, but the apparatus in the United Bible Societies' edition only mentions two of the Coptic versions, and it would be interesting to know more about this particular text in each of its ancient appearances. For the time being, however, I do not understand how anyone can say that the agreement between 3 Nephi 12:22 and the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament does not meet sufficient criteria of authenticity, that this is not a significant case of the Book of Mormon agreeing with the better Greek traditions while disagreeing with the KJV, and that this case is therefore worth nothing.

Moreover, Larson's criteria change over time. For example, in 1986, Larson stated his criteria somewhat differently: "In each of these cases where there is unanimity among the modern editors, this critical text is always supported by the best Greek MSS—by the A.D. 200 P64 (where it is extant) and by at least the two oldest uncials, as well some minuscules. In each case it also has some Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and early patristic support."<sup>46</sup> Now he insists that those minuscules must come exclusively from Family 1. I wonder, however, why other late Greek manuscripts are not acceptable and whether the word "some" cannot be satisfied in this case by Jerome's Latin and the preponderance of early patristic support (including papyrus 2174).

I do not argue that the textual case for Matthew 5:22 is absolutely certain, but then I do not believe that many textual questions can be absolutely settled. Still, the Book of Mormon version of Matthew 5:22 is close enough to merit careful considera-

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<sup>45</sup> Larson complains that I misrepresent the age of the Greek textual witnesses for Matthew 5:44 and claims that the word "early" cannot apply to a fifth-century Greek text (p. 143). For Larson, a manuscript is "early" if it is from the fourth century, but not from the fifth century. But the world of New Testament textual criticism is not so black and white as Larson's approach presumes. A similar point can be made with respect to Larson's unwillingness to admit that the case for Matthew 5:44 is "not as strong" as his other examples, which is all I had claimed. While I am well aware of the arguments advanced by Larson regarding Matthew 5:44, I continue to feel that the evidence for Matthew 5:44 in Bezae Cantabrigiensis (D) is worth something.

<sup>46</sup> Larson, "The Sermon on the Mount," 43.



tion. It would probably be among the first examples to be included as secure readings if Larson's criteria were expanded only slightly.

In the end, ironically, while Larson considers Matthew 5:22 to be "a genuinely ambiguous case," he rightly leans "on balance . . . to the opinion that *eike* 'without a cause' was *not* originally at Matthew 5:22." (p. 128, emphasis added). Thus Larson and I agree that the omission of "without a cause" in the Book of Mormon conforms with the most likely reading of the original version of Matthew, as far as textual criticism can determine. Having admitted this, however, Larson still gives the Book of Mormon no credit for containing this reading.

Rather than give the Book of Mormon due credit, Larson turns to another argument, namely that some biblical scholars knew of the absence of *eike* before 1830. The implication is that Joseph Smith may have learned this omission from sources around him (although Larson is correct to admit that "not too much significance should be attached to this agreement," because then one would have to admit that Joseph Smith could have equally known the other textual differences that he does not follow). Thus, in the end Larson falls back on the idea that the omission of "without a cause" from 3 Nephi 12:22 was merely coincidental. But how can this most glaring omission—the only instance in the Greek manuscripts where the variants produce a true difference in meaning—not count as one of those "fine distinctions that are clues in textual criticism," distinctions upon which Larson boldly relies elsewhere? Furthermore, how can Larson so boldly say that the Book of Mormon "*always* aligns itself with the derivative text" and "*never* agrees with either the original text or any of the other known variant readings" (p. 129, emphases in original)?

In conclusion, Larson has delivered less than he has promised. His examples, although textually sound within the Greek manuscripts, are basically inconsequential to a translator. As such, they provide little evidence of what was or was not on the plates of Mormon. Larson's eight examples are selected on the basis of specially designed criteria that produce the desired result. Larson ignores examples that work against his thesis, such as Matthew 5:22; overlooks places where the Book of Mormon reflects a possible underlying Hebrew vocabulary or syntax; and leaves untouched the differences between the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount. Larson

also ignores broader contextual arguments. He looks at 3 Nephi 12–14 in isolation, without recognizing that those chapters are not blindly or crudely spliced into a coherent temple discourse in 3 Nephi 11–18.

Larson overstates his conclusions; nevertheless, he has done his homework well. I believe he has presented the strongest case possible against the Book of Mormon based on existing manuscript evidence of Matthew 5–7. That case, however, does not inexorably compel the conclusion that Larson unequivocally and boldly announces, namely that “the Book of Mormon account of Jesus’ sermon in 3 Nephi 12–14 originated in the nineteenth century, derived from unacknowledged plagiarism of the KJV.” If a person wants reasons to reject the Book of Mormon, Larson has provided some reasons. Using similar tools and methods and many others as well, one can produce ample reasons on the other side of the ledger for accepting the Book of Mormon. I am happy with a draw on this issue. The historicity of the Book of Mormon, in my opinion, has not been proved or disproved by Larson’s eight examples.

### **Alma 12–13 and the Epistle to the Hebrews**

In chapter six of *New Approaches*, David Wright argues that Alma 12–13 relies upon and transforms passages from the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews, particularly certain verses from Hebrews chapters three and seven. From this study, he concludes that the entire Book of Mormon, in all significant respects, was written by Joseph Smith (pp. 165, 207). Although his presentation is more elaborate and more articulate than previous iterations of this approach, Wright’s argument is essentially not new. It is simply another instance of the standard criticism that has long been raised, that the Book of Mormon plagiarizes the Bible by using biblical words and phrases. This approach has typically assumed that any verbal, textual, sequential, typological, or other similarities between the Book of Mormon and the New Testament automatically condemn the Book of Mormon as having no ancient foundation whatever.

Wright’s argument adds two new dimensions to this approach. First, critics in the past have focused most frequently on the similarities between 3 Nephi 12–14 and Matthew 5–7, Ether 12 and Hebrews 11, and Moroni 7 and 1 Corinthians 13, but those Book of Mormon texts come after the appearance of

Jesus at the temple in Bountiful, and therefore these post-Easter similarities between the Book of Mormon and the New Testament can be assumed, on the Book of Mormon's own terms, to reflect in whole or in part the teachings of Jesus among those people. Wright now turns to a pre-Easter text in Alma 12–13 as the subject of examination. Second, Wright places great weight on the order in which six elements appear in Alma 13 and in Hebrews 7. Although these similarities can be explained on several other grounds (including revelation, dependence on texts in the brass plates, and the simple word choice of Joseph Smith as translator), Wright prefers to conclude that his examples cumulatively produce irrefutable and completely dependable evidence that Joseph Smith composed not just Alma 12–13, but the entire Book of Mormon.

As discussed in detail below, I disagree with Wright's conclusions for several reasons: his arguments minimize the importance of Genesis 14; they overstate the influence of Hebrews on Alma 12–13 and fail to give adequate weight to significant differences between these texts; they ignore other explanations for the phenomena observed; and they overlook and discount an abundance of biblical phrases in Alma 12–13 and throughout the Book of Mormon. From his research, Wright draws conclusions that need not follow, and in the end leaves too many questions unanswered, purporting to have explained only a small part of a complex text.

Wright is not the first to examine the Melchizedek traditions in Alma 13. My article, entitled "The Melchizedek Material in Alma 13:13–19,"<sup>47</sup> covers much of the same ground, works with virtually the same texts, cites and analyzes almost the same scholarly literature pertaining to Melchizedek, but reaches a much different conclusion. Readers who are interested in an approach to Alma 13 that sees Alma's use and interpretation of the traditional Melchizedek material in a positive light are encouraged to consider the side of the argument I have presented.<sup>48</sup> In

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<sup>47</sup> John W. Welch, "The Melchizedek Material in Alma 13:13–19," in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 2:238–72.

<sup>48</sup> An earlier version of my article was presented at a symposium at Brigham Young University in 1975, published informally in 1978 in a collection of essays in honor of Hugh Nibley's 65th birthday and distributed as a F.A.R.M.S. preliminary report beginning in 1984.

it, I discuss, compare, and distinguish Hebrews 7 and Alma 13,<sup>49</sup> setting the text of Alma 13 off from a wide variety of theological interpretations given to the traditional Melchizedek material stemming from Genesis 14.

Except on a few occasions where it helps his case, Wright condemns my approach as "an inadequate solution to the problem because it [1] does not recognize or explain the parallels between this Alma passage and Hebrews 7:1-4 nor [2] does it recognize and explain the other parallels that exist between Hebrews and Alma 12-13 or [3] Ether 12" (p. 204 n. 82, brackets added). Before turning to the parallels between Hebrews and Alma, the failure to account for Hebrews 11 and Ether 12 can be dismissed as a make-weight. The most that Wright claims for the dependence of Alma 13:10-12 on Hebrews 11 is that the verses in Alma "have a narrative-like character and speak in summary of past exemplary ancients. This parallels roughly the narrative-like genre of Hebrews 11" (p. 195). Wright acknowledges the fact that Hebrews 11 has nothing to do with priesthood (the essence of Alma 13), but conveniently explains this difference as an interpretive contribution by Joseph Smith. This logic is flimsy: similarities prove that Alma relies on Hebrews, and differences prove that Alma is an interpretation of Hebrews. If similarities prove dependence, how do differences not prove independence? The pertinence of Hebrews 11 to Alma 13 seems extremely remote and speculative.

Wright dismisses virtually all of the work on the Book of Mormon by everyone except Ed Ashment, Marvin Hill, Robert Hullinger, Tony Hutchinson, Bill Russell, George Smith, Mark Thomas, and Dan Vogel as unsatisfactory and of little value, because "much of this work has been highly speculative" (p. 165 n. 2). Admittedly, some Book of Mormon research, but certainly not all, has been exploratory and tentative, and where such studies attempt to develop new ideas and explore new avenues of inquiry, their authors have tried (we hope successfully) to acknowledge the cautious nature of that work. It is unbecoming, however, for Wright to be so jaundiced about speculation. Readers may judge for themselves the many crucial points at which Wright's own work is highly speculative and

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49 Welch, "Melchizedek Materials," 250-51.

prejudicially limited by certain assumptions and explanations he is willing to adopt.

*The Importance of Genesis 14.* Wright claims to have found "six . . . elements or motifs of Hebrews 7:1–4 [that] appear in the same order" in Alma 13:17–19 (p. 171, emphasis in original). They are: (1) "this Melchizedek," (2) "king," (3) "Salem," (4) "priest," (5) "father," and (6) "great." The first four of these elements come directly from Genesis 14:18: "And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God." One may assume that Alma knew some version of this text from the brass plates. Alma 13:17–18 reads: "Now this Melchizedek was a king over the land of Salem, . . . having exercised mighty faith, and received the office of the high priesthood according to the holy order of God. . . . And Melchizedek did establish peace in the land in his days; therefore he was called the prince of peace, for he was the king of Salem." I have discussed elsewhere the relationships between Genesis 14 and Alma 13.<sup>50</sup> Wright supplies his readers with over ten pages of parallel columns, in seven parts, relating biblical texts to Alma 12–13. Although in one column he compares Hebrews 7 to Genesis 14, one must wonder why he does not provide a column showing the parallels between Genesis 14 and Alma 13, for it accounts for over half of his six key elements.

Wright discounts the significance of Genesis 14 (which clearly contains points two, three, and four of his six) because Alma 13 and Hebrews 7 both mention the name Melchizedek with the demonstrative "this," and because Genesis 14 also lacks points five and six on Wright's list (on which more later). The presence of the phrase "now this Melchizedek" in both Alma 13:17 and Hebrews 7:1 should not, however, eliminate Genesis 14 from the discussion of Alma 13. "Now this" is a common Old Testament expression (e.g., Genesis 29:34; Exodus 29:38; Judges 20:9; Ruth 4:7; 1 Samuel 25:27; Ezra 7:11; Isaiah 47:8; 51:21), and it appears frequently in the Book of Mormon (e.g., Jacob 7:22; Mosiah 25:20; 28:18; Alma 1:23, 25; 2:2–3, 8; 4:17; 14:16; 25:8; 30:19). Indeed, Alma 2:2 combines this expression with a proper name, "Now this Amlici." Accordingly, this idiom need not point exclusively to Hebrews 7. Moreover, the phrase "this Melchizedek" is harmonious with the rhetoric of Alma 13 and is a natural occurrence following the two references to

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 243–47.

Melchizedek in Alma 13:14 and 15, along with several emphatic expressions using the word "this," such as "high priest after this same order" (Alma 13:14), and "it was this same Melchizedek" (Alma 13:15). One of the hallmarks of the so-called new approach to the Book of Mormon is the use of tools of rhetorical analysis; but in this regard rhetorical analysis works against Wright's hypothesis by reducing significantly the weight that can be placed on the word "this" in Alma 13:17. In this case, rhetorical analysis of point one in Alma 13 need not lead us to Hebrews 7 in place of Genesis 14.

Consider also the significance of the order of Wright's six points. The order is the result of selectively excluding much material, which the reader can readily find in Alma 13:17-19. Moreover, when the order of other elements is inconsistent with the Hebrews hypothesis, can that discrepancy be so easily ignored? (For example, see pp. 215-16, where the order in which tithing and the eternal nature of Melchizedek's priesthood are mentioned in Alma 13 does not conform with the order of Hebrews 7.) Thus, the order of these six elements may be much less significant than Wright concludes.

To the contrary, the order of other elements may point toward Genesis 14 as Alma's base text. The establishment of peace by Melchizedek (Alma 13:18) corresponds in Genesis 14:19-20 with the order of Melchizedek's blessing to Abraham, praising God for delivering Abraham from his enemies; and the magnanimous division of the spoils in Genesis 14:21-24 may well have contributed to Alma's observation that, although many were before and many were after Melchizedek, none were greater.

Wright's second point sees "king of Salem" (Genesis 14:18; Hebrews 7:1) corresponding with "a king over the land of Salem" (Alma 13:17), but since Genesis and Hebrews are identical here, Alma's words may have come from Genesis as easily as from Hebrews, and Alma is not identical to either. Moreover, Wright accepts my suggestion that the phrase "high God" may have been related in Alma's mind to the "high priesthood" mentioned frequently in Alma 13, but Wright uses this only as an example of free association, and scarcely acknowledges that the phrase "high God" comes only from Genesis 14, and is not mentioned in Hebrews 7 (p. 174). Thus, Genesis 14 explains more of Alma 13 than does Hebrews 7; Genesis 14 is more important than Wright leads one to believe.

*The Alleged Influence of Hebrews on Alma 13.* While underemphasizing the importance of Genesis 14, Wright overstates the alleged influence of Hebrews 7 on Alma 13. In many ways, Alma 13 is an independent text. For example, as mentioned above, the phrase "priest of the most high God" (Genesis 14:18; Hebrews 7:1) never appears in Alma 13. This reduces the significance of the alleged order in which Melchizedek's priesthood is mentioned in Alma 13 (a chapter which contains many references to that priesthood), and also points out one of many differences between these texts.

Similarly, Hebrews 7 describes Melchizedek as being without "beginning of days, nor end of life," whereas Alma 13:7 describes his priesthood as "without beginning of days or end of years." The words "end of years" appear in Daniel 11:6. This phrase, like others here, such as those dealing with "beginning" and "end" and "from eternity to all eternity" (Alma 13:7) are common in the scriptures and can be identified with the aid of a computer.<sup>51</sup> In other words, phrases like these in Alma 13 that are crucial to parts of Wright's arguments are not exclusive to Hebrews, and some of them are not found there at all. Thus, one should not overstate the possible influence of Hebrews 7 on Alma 13.

Wright's fourth point derives from a remark about the meaning of Melchizedek's name or title. The differences here between Hebrews 7 and Alma 13 also deserve more attention. Wright admits that "King of righteousness" and the word "righteousness" do not appear in Alma 13:17-19, whereas this is the interpretation of the name Melchizedek given in Hebrews 7. If Joseph Smith were simply free associating with the text of Hebrews 7, it is quite surprising in a text devoted so extensively to perfection and righteousness that he would not have utilized the point. Wright makes a valid observation that the phrase "Prince of Peace" is found in Isaiah, as well as in Alma 13, but it bears reminding that the phrase "Prince of Peace" is not found in Hebrews 7. And indeed, Alma had the text of Isaiah 9:6, and so this expression would have been known to Alma, who could well have introduced it into the Melchizedek pericope. For, after all, the point of Alma 13:16 is that the priesthood ordinances

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<sup>51</sup> "Beginning" and "end" are combined in Deuteronomy 11:12; Ecclesiastes 3:11; Isaiah 46:10; Alma 11:39; 3 Nephi 9:18; "beginning" and "days" in 2 Samuel 21:9; Moses 1:3; and "eternity to all eternity" in Mosiah 3:5; Moroni 8:18; Moses 6:67; 7:29; 7:31.

were performed in a manner such that "the people might look forward on the Son of God"; hence, for Alma to utilize a Messianic phrase from Isaiah in connection with Melchizedek only two verses later fits the rhetorical context of the passage.

Wright's fifth point is that both texts make mention of Melchizedek's father. Here again the differences are significant. In Hebrews 7, the main argument is that the Melchizedek Priesthood is superior to the Levitical Priesthood. Rights to the Levitical Priesthood were inherited by birth into the tribe of Levi, but Melchizedek lived before the times of Levi and Moses, and, accordingly, numerous commentators, both ancient and modern, have noted the salient fact that Melchizedek is the only priest mentioned in the Old Testament whose lineage is not given. When Alma (after considerable discussion of the wickedness of the ancient people) mentions Melchizedek's faith, the high priesthood, the holy order of God, the preaching of repentance, repentance causing peace, and Melchizedek's having been a prince who reigned under his father, need we associate this with Hebrews 7:3, "without father, without mother"? Since one can reasonably assume that Alma knew that the Genesis account did not mention Melchizedek's parentage and wished to use Melchizedek as the preeminent example of the High Priesthood "after the order of the Son, the Only Begotten of the *Father*" (Alma 13:9, emphasis added), what would be more logical for Alma to state than that this Melchizedek (a type of Christ) reigned under his father, just as Christ stands under his Father? The presence of the ideas of fatherhood and sonship already in the text of Alma 13:5-9 diminishes the likelihood that the mention of Melchizedek's father in Alma 13:18 was spawned by some reflex to Hebrews 7:3.

Finally, Wright's sixth point is the mention of Melchizedek's greatness. Here it is true that Hebrews 7:4 says, "Now consider how great this man was," but again the question is whether this would not be a natural concluding comment for Alma to have made independently. The word "great" is a fairly common word in any language, and the mysterious importance of Melchizedek has naturally fascinated Jews and Christians for many centuries, as I have discussed at some length.<sup>52</sup> The greatness of Melchizedek was intuitively obvious, for example, to the writers of the books of *Jubilees* and *2 Enoch*, to the authors of the

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<sup>52</sup> Welch, "Melchizedek Materials," 247-54.



Melchizedek document from Qumran, to Philo, and to several early Christian sects.

*Other Explanations.* The question that I would prefer to ask is whether it is logically plausible that Alma could have drawn the Melchizedek material in Alma 13 from Genesis 14. I believe that he not only could have, but that in doing so, he produced an interpretation of the traditional Genesis material that harmonized with the Nephite religion and politics of his day such that Alma 13 “bears the hallmarks of an early record . . . conceptually and textually superior to later interpretations.”<sup>53</sup> The elements in Genesis 14 invite all of the interpretive points used by Alma. Melchizedek’s service to the “Most High God” invites comments about “high priesthood” and about Melchizedek’s greatness. The fact that Alma 13 uses the name Abraham instead of Abram does not preclude the possibility that Alma used Genesis 14, as Wright argues (p. 178 n. 30). Alma would have used the name Abraham in any event; and even if he had not, Joseph Smith could have translated Abram as Abraham.

*The Abundance of Biblical References in Alma 12–13.* There has never been any doubt that the translation of the Book of Mormon by Joseph Smith makes frequent and open use of King James vocabulary and idioms. Over the years, several Latter-day Saint writers have suggested good reasons why Joseph Smith used the common religious language of his day and why the Lord would speak to those people “after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding” (D&C 1:24). Although little is known about the translation process, it seems to me that Joseph Smith’s English translation was a more expressive than a mechanically literal rendition, while still corresponding in some way, point by point, with the ancient record he was translating; thus he was at liberty to use King James phraseology if that best communicated the meaning of the underlying record as he understood it.

The question is whether Wright has proved such a concentration of passages from the Epistle to the Hebrews in Alma 12–13 that one should conclude that Joseph Smith had the Epistle to the Hebrews any more concretely in mind than simply through his awareness of its expressions or verbal building blocks that could be used in the translation process. Biblical verbiage pervades not only Alma 12–13 but virtually every chapter in the

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

Book of Mormon, but these occurrences arise so randomly that one cannot imagine Joseph consciously locating and depending upon these phrases in the Bible as he went along sentence by sentence. At least 145 phrases in Alma 12–13 have precise parallels to passages that come from all parts of the Bible.<sup>54</sup> Are we to conclude some special affinity between the Epistle to the Hebrews and Alma 12–13 when at the same time Alma 12–13 draws on numerous other books of scripture as well? Moreover, are we to assume that Joseph flipped back and forth from page to page in his Bible, first drawing out this, then that, eloquent turn of phrase? Or is it not more logical to assume that these phrases were simply a part of his working translation vocabulary?

Although I cannot put my finger on the place in the Loeb Library's translation of one of the orations of Cicero, I remember reading that translation many years ago and running across a statement in one of Cicero's writings to the effect that we now see only through a glass darkly. My interest perked up immediately. Since the rhetoric of Cicero was famous throughout the Roman Empire for over a century before Paul's time, I wondered if this could be the place where Paul had learned this idiom, which he uses in 1 Corinthians 13:12. But I looked to the Latin text in vain. The Latin simply said something to the effect that human knowledge is incomplete and vague. While the English translation conveyed the meaning accurately, especially to someone familiar with the New Testament idiom, it was not a literal word for word translation of the Latin. I imagine that something similar may well have taken place as Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon. Phrases such as those used by Wright to prove his point may be perfectly appropriate translations without necessarily being the kind of translations that he has assumed.

*Treatment of Alma 12 and Hebrews 3.* I find Wright's arguments regarding Hebrews 3 quite bewildering. Never mind

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<sup>54</sup> John Maddox, with the aid of computers, has identified 145 exact phrases, four words or longer, that appear in the Bible and also in Alma 12–13. This number would greatly increase if phrases were counted that differ from each other only by one word. These phrases are found in virtually all books of the Old and New Testaments. Only seven of these 145 biblical expressions are unique to the Epistle to the Hebrews, but often even they differ from phrases in other parts of the Bible by only a word or two. A copy of Maddox's report is on file at F.A.R.M.S.

that he acknowledges that “there are significant differences between the parallel elements in the two works” (p. 178) and can only conclude that “it seems these motifs were inspired by Hebrews” (p. 182); he still boldly proceeds with his interpretive excursions, confident that Joseph Smith used Hebrews 3 to serve new ends in Alma 12–13. Because this is a new argument, I will give it more attention.

The key text in Hebrews 3:7–11 is, of course, a verbatim quote from the Septuagint Greek translation of Psalm 95:7–11. (Readers should familiarize themselves with Psalm 95.) Hebrews 3 contains not merely “the motifs of Psalms 95:7–11,” as the heading to Wright’s table on page 218 indicates, but the identical text.<sup>55</sup> It speaks of the four main elements identified here by Wright: hardening hearts, entering into God’s rest, hearing the voice of God today, and provoking God.

The two main elements that bear the weight of Wright’s argument that Hebrews 3 (as opposed to Psalm 95) inspired Alma 12 are found in the words: (1) “wherefore (as the Holy Ghost sayeth)” and (2) “take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief.” These words frame the quotation of Psalm 95 in Hebrews 3.

Alma 12:33–35 also contains a quoted text (although a different text from Hebrews 3 and Psalm 95). It happens to be bracketed by an introductory phrase, “but *God* did call on men, in the name of his Son, (this being the plan of redemption which was laid) saying,” and by a concluding transition, “and *now*, *my brethren*, behold I say unto you, that if ye will harden your hearts ye shall not enter into the rest of the Lord” (emphasis added). But these similarities between Alma 12 and Hebrews 3 are faint, at best.

How else does one introduce the quotation of a text attributed to God except by some reference to deity? Are we to overlook the different focus on the Holy Ghost in Hebrews, and the greater length of the introduction in Alma? The point is, until one reaches the word “provocation” in Alma 12:36, one would have no reason to suspect that Psalm 95 or Hebrews 3 had any possible relationship with Alma’s text. In fact, as I discuss further below, all of the elements in Alma 12 that might point to Hebrews 3 seem to relate more directly to Numbers 14 than to

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<sup>55</sup> Just as Wright offers the reader no parallel column between Genesis 14 and Alma 13, he gives the reader no parallel column between Psalm 95 and Alma 12.

either Psalm 95 or Hebrews 3. Why, then, should the words "God call upon men" steer attention to Hebrews 3? And by the time Hebrews 3 is even potentially in the picture in Alma 12:36, the place in Alma 12:33 where Joseph's translation was allegedly influenced by the reference to the Holy Ghost in Hebrews 3 is several verses past in Joseph's dictation.

And how else does Alma return to addressing his audience except by calling them "brethren"? In fact, the phrase "now my brethren" was standard in Nephite rhetoric; it appears 21 times in the Book of Mormon; over half come from the portion between Alma 5 and Alma 34. By using this phrase in Alma 12:36, Alma does not lead us to Hebrews 3, but is using an expression common to many of his own texts.

Moreover, Alma 12:36 resumptively reiterates the hardening of hearts, whereas Hebrews 3:12 differently speaks of taking heed, possessing an evil heart of unbelief, and departing from the living God. Any connection here is extremely remote.

Since the alleged influences on Alma 12 of the introductory and concluding elements from Hebrews 3 are so tenuous, one should turn more attention to Psalm 95. Wright correctly points out that Alma 12:33–35 does not quote from Psalm 95 (p. 178). But how can one rule out general influence from Psalm 95, and not Hebrews 3, when the four key elements in Hebrews 3–4 that supposedly influenced Alma 12–13 are equally present in Psalm 95? Alma is not quoting Psalm 95 in Alma 12:33–35, but then he is not quoting Hebrews 3 either.<sup>56</sup>

The words attributed to God in Alma 12:33–35 have an interesting independent structure, with the following elements:

repent  
 harden not your hearts  
 mercy  
 Only Begotten Son

repenteth  
 hardeneth not his heart  
 mercy  
 Only Begotten Son

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<sup>56</sup> Wright asserts "that Smith is not working with Psalm 95 directly" (p. 184 n. 42), but this does not increase the odds that Joseph Smith was working with Hebrews 3. See the reviews by John A. Tvedtnes and John Gee, in this volume, pages 8–50, 51–121.

unto remission of sins  
shall enter into my rest

harden his heart and do iniquity  
shall not enter into my rest

Nothing here is particularly reminiscent of Psalm 95 or Hebrews 3. There is no mention of listening today, provocation, temptation, or wilderness.

Actually, another Book of Mormon text, Jacob 1:7, is interestingly close to Psalm 95.<sup>57</sup> Jacob exhorted his people to “partake of the goodness of God, that they might *enter into his rest*, lest by any means he should *swear in his wrath* they should not enter in, as in the *provocation* in the days of *temptation* while the children of Israel were in the *wilderness*” (Jacob 1:7, emphasis added). Jacob then goes on to speak of persuading “all men not to *rebel* against God, to provoke him to anger” (Jacob 1:8). This text indicates that the Nephites probably knew Psalm 95 and Numbers 14; and if they did, then Alma’s allusions in Alma 12 to the most famous Israelite rebellion in the wilderness would be perfectly understandable. Numbers 14 speaks of provoking God, rebelling against the Lord, God’s swearing unto the people that they will not enter into the land, God’s great mercy, the people murmuring in the wilderness, and not hearkening to God’s voice but ultimately rising up and repenting, admitting that they had sinned. Mercy and repentance are stronger themes in Numbers 14 and Alma 12 than in Hebrews 3–4. This evidence that the Nephites had Psalm 95 along with the five books of Moses containing an account of the rebellion in the wilderness in Numbers 14 provides ample explanation for Alma’s use of the words provoke, provocation,<sup>58</sup> wrath, etc.

Wright attempts to bolster his case by arguing that his four main motifs “have a similar numerical concentration” in Alma 12–13 (p. 181). But the idea of hardening one’s heart, or being hard-hearted, is very common in the Book of Mormon and in the Old Testament (especially in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy), so its occurrence in Alma 12–13 is not distinctive. The idea of entering into God’s rest occurs fairly com-

<sup>57</sup> Wright considers this text “a separate matter,” and baldly asserts that Jacob’s words “may also depend on Hebrews” (p. 184 n. 42).

<sup>58</sup> A relatively common word in the Old Testament, especially in Deuteronomy and Jeremiah (texts associated with Lehi’s time in Jerusalem).

monly and in various forms in the writings of Jacob, Alma, Helaman, and in 3 Nephi. Wright must stretch to find Alma emphasizing "today" as the time for faithfulness in Alma 12–13, for neither chapter mentions the word "today" and both of Wright's suggested references come at the end of chapter 13, well removed from the alleged association in chapter 12 with words from Hebrews 3 or Psalm 95. By the time Joseph Smith began dictating the conclusion to this sermon of Alma at the end of Alma 13, any residual influence of the word "today" from Hebrews 3 on Alma 12:36 would have long faded out of his awareness or recall.

Besides seeing nothing new in this approach, I see no reason to follow Wright in his tenuous associations of these texts. Wright's arguments have the appearance of erudition, but lack sense and substance.

*Erroneous Conclusion and Unanswered Questions.* Although it exceeds the space available in this review to deal with every paragraph in Wright's article, I have tried to make a good faith effort to understand the most crucial parts of his evidence and logic. While he attempts to redeem Alma 12–13 by praising these chapters as the product of "the creative and religious genius of Joseph Smith" (p. 211), I believe that Alma 12–13 makes perfectly good sense as a product of the creative and inspired genius of Alma the Younger. Wright's evidence is not so unequivocal as he is willing to believe. It follows that he overstates himself when he concludes: These indications "that Alma 12–13 were written by Joseph Smith" imply "almost without saying" that "the rest of the Book of Mormon was composed by him" (p. 207).<sup>59</sup> Although I find it fascinating to explore new approaches that probe how Joseph Smith may have understood a text in the Book of Mormon, or what a passage of scripture would have meant, especially to a nineteenth-century audience, I fail to see how it logically follows that, because a text would have had meaning to Joseph Smith or his associates, the text could not have been the product of some process of translation of an ancient record.

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<sup>59</sup> Elsewhere, Wright is more appropriately cautious, as is typical of his better scholarly work: "certainly other factors helped move Smith to compose the text in this case. But the problems in Hebrews do seem to have guided the formulation of Alma 12–13 to some degree, and thus these chapters constitute *something* of an exegetical response to Hebrews" (p. 194, emphasis added).

I still wonder how the complex and eloquent text of Alma 12–13 came into being other than in the manner explained by Joseph Smith. I have a hard time imagining Joseph Smith dictating this text without extraordinary assistance. Alma 12–13 has enduring spiritual power. It harbors elements that seem to carry a cargo of sacred ritual.<sup>60</sup> It meshes logically and developmentally with the surrounding Nephite culture as depicted during the time of Alma the Younger. It comports with the other sermons of Alma. It springs up abruptly in the middle of a gripping narrative and then blends naturally and realistically into the complex web of themes and events that unfold in the book of Alma. To me, the existence of Alma 12–13 cannot be explained by the verbal similarities between a few verses in the Epistle to the Hebrews and a few segments of Alma 12–13. More is going on here. It is not sufficient to argue that by explaining one part, you have explained the whole. Such an explanation is partial, perhaps in both senses of the word.

### **Postscript: Questioning the Ahistorical Approach**

The authors of *New Approaches* invite readers to reject the Book of Mormon as real history. At the same time, the authors claim that readers can do so and remain faithful Latter-day Saints. In my mind, this “ahistorical view” raises more questions for a Latter-day Saint than it answers.

The ahistorical view selectively ignores or discounts a great deal of other evidence. What about the Three and Eight Witnesses? What about the remarkably well-documented events of 1829, the short time, and the isolated circumstances under which the Book of Mormon was translated? Do such things count for nothing? What about those places where the Book of Mormon most obviously does read like an ancient text? If one nineteenth-century feature disproves the book, what does the existence of one ancient attribute prove? Just because the book *can* be read as a nineteenth-century book, what does that prove? The book *can* also be read as an ancient book. Indeed, its mission is to speak to all people. Thus the Book of Mormon would

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<sup>60</sup> See my discussion in Welch, “Melchizedek Materials,” 240–41; discussed in greater detail in John W. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon: The Temples at the Cities of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful,” F.A.R.M.S. paper, 1993, 57–60.

contradict its own stated mission if it could not in some sense be read by all people, anywhere, anytime.

The ahistorical view oversimplifies the Book of Mormon; it discounts the book's complexity. If Latter-day Saints reject the explanations given by Joseph Smith, they must find a better way to explain the following complexities: records inside of records, later passages quoting and interpreting earlier passages, loose ends all tied together, presupposed backgrounds that make sense, character traits of individuals that are true to life and consistent, and many other features. How did any author keep all of the historical, geographical, chronological, personal, textual, literary, doctrinal, legal, political, and military strands, plots, and subplots in his head concurrently in order to dictate the Book of Mormon without notes or a first draft? Should Latter-day Saints ignore or deny such complexity?

Does the ahistorical view make Joseph Smith a liar? Does that view contradict other scriptures, such as D&C 20 and several other revelations that confirm the antiquity of the record translated by Joseph Smith?

The ahistorical view is an attempt (sometimes overtly, other times covertly) to redefine the faith. Who has authority to redefine the faith? In a Latter-day Saint context, does one give no thought to channels of revelation or authority to proclaim and define doctrine? People who advance the ahistorical view see value in having a diversity of views within the Church, but is diversity of all kinds always good? Diversity in personality, culture, roles, talents, and in the use of general principles to fulfill individual needs is, of course, valuable and appropriate. Limits exist, however, on the value of diversity. Otherwise, its champions would become disciples of chaos. Are there many versions of Mormonism, or is there only one gospel, one faith, and one Lord?

Is the ahistorical view a misguided voice or a helpful voice? Does this view pursue "selfish personal interests, such as property, pride, prominence, or power?" Are these the "bleatings of lost souls who cannot hear the voice of the Shepherd and trot about trying to find their way without his guidance"?<sup>61</sup> Or are these helpful alternate voices? Not all alternate voices are bad. "Some alternate voices are those of well-motivated men and

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<sup>61</sup> Dallin H. Oaks, "Alternate Voices," *Ensign* 19 (May 1989): 27–28.



women who are merely trying to serve their brothers and sisters and further the cause of Zion. Their efforts fit within the Lord's teaching."<sup>62</sup> There is room within the Church for a variety of efforts and many kinds of talents and works, but above them all are the categories of good and bad: there are good methods of reasoning and bad, good works and bad, good voices and bad.

Is the ahistorical view cohesive? Is this house divided against itself? Do the assumptions and conclusions of one practitioner of the ahistorical view contradict those of another? Or do we find here a situation where natural enemies have become allies only because they are united by a common objective or against a common foe?<sup>63</sup>

Is the ahistorical view self-contradictory? Is it logically possible to accept the "contents" of the Book of Mormon, but not the basic claims of the book itself? What consistently applied criterion can be found that will allow one to accept the religious contents of the book without having to embrace its historical claims? Can religion and history be separated logically or only on an ad hoc basis?

Do the people who promote the ahistorical view overstate the strength of their conclusions, on their own scholarly terms? Do they overstate the degree of consensus among scholars on the points that they assert so confidently to be accepted universally and without doubt?

If good scholars understand the limitations of their own fields, do the people espousing the ahistorical view of the Book of Mormon share a sense of scholarly humility? Have we overcome the common problem of pride among academicians who figure that when they have a little knowledge, they have got everything figured out?

Since the ahistorical view encourages readers to entertain the possibility that the Book of Mormon is *not* historical (a possibility that Nibley, especially, has discussed head-on), does that view (in order to be balanced) equally encourage people to entertain the possibility that the Book of Mormon *is* historical? If not,

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>63</sup> We see the same phenomenon among anti-Mormons, where arguments by evangelical fundamentalists and liberal biblical scholars are marshalled together against the Book of Mormon even though the absolute literalism of the fundamentalists is totally in opposition to the higher critical methods of the liberal scholars.

is the ahistorical view really as balanced and as neutral as it claims to be?

Does the ahistorical view push scholarly techniques beyond their limits? Because each tool has its limits, one must wonder if the critical scholars' conclusions have exceeded the limits of the tools employed. Furthermore, even where those tools are used within their normal range of appropriate application, are they being used correctly?

Does the ahistorical approach view only part of the whole picture? Are we being shown enough of each picture and of the whole picture, or are we being invited to see only a limited field of vision and a selected collection of data? How limiting are the methods and rules of a particular discipline or the range of phenomena it has selected to examine and to draw conclusions about?

Is the ahistorical view rational or does it offer only rationalization? Rationalists reject a thing because it doesn't sound likely. It is counterintuitive. It can't be. Books don't come from angels, virgins don't give birth, people don't walk through seas on dry ground, people don't walk on water. It's not rational. But must religion be entirely rational? Is the physical world rational? Are earthquakes and traffic accidents rational? Is the spiritual world rational? In what sense? What does "rational" mean? Is "rational" just another word for what a given individual happens to think is normal? Is rationality a creation of the observer, a way in which people impose a variety of order on their world? Does rationality mean that God cannot act in a way that is not usual? Or does rationality just mean the ability to supply a reason?

If rationality simply means the ability to supply a reason, then anything can be "reasonable," and, in that sense, the Book of Mormon is rational. One can give many explanations for or against it, enough to satisfy a curious mind or to imagine why God would have done something a certain way. Thus, the real question is not whether a reason can be given, but whether an individual will choose to accept or reject a given reason. Ultimately, this issue probably boils down to choice: "choose ye this day," choose between that which testifies of Christ and that which does not (2 Nephi 2:26-27).

Is it appropriate that those who advocate the ahistorical view have placed a premium on the personal odyssey? What is being communicated by stories that tell "how I came to reject the Book

of Mormon"? Is it significant that these authors turn to this mode of persuasion, even though they purport to be displaying nothing but the cold hard facts? What place does the emotionalism of a personal odyssey have in a purportedly rational, objective presentation?

What are the motives of these critical scholars? What do they really want and why? Do they think the Church would be better off rejecting the Book of Mormon? Can they construct a persuasive case for that claim? Are their tactics unoffensive and candid?

Does the ahistorical view take the easy way out? Is this the low road of higher criticism? At what point does literary criticism become a road of least resistance that allows a scholar, who has invested time and effort in learning ancient language skills, to continue working after coming to believe that the ancient texts have little or no objectively normative religious content? Does the critic have a better product to offer? And if the critic's product is equally subject to uncertainty, then where has the "new" approach taken us?

Has the ahistorical view always yielded desirable results in biblical studies? Other churches and denominations have gone down the path of critical studies of the Bible. How has their journey turned out? Are biblical scholars happy with the directions of critical studies in their own field? Why do many of them speak of the contemporary irrelevance of their work? Have critical methods left the Bible bankrupt? Have they missed the point of the biblical record? Have they looked beyond the mark? Have they strained out the gnat but swallowed a camel?

Personally, I have always found it easier to accept the Book of Mormon as a nineteenth-century translation of an ancient record than to argue that it has no significant ancient elements at all. I have explained elsewhere how I think the English translation process produced "quite a precise translation," sometimes more literal than other times, and "while being more expressive than a mechanically literal rendition, still . . . corresponded in some way, point-by-point, with the ancient writing that was being translated, . . . although one cannot know in all cases how close that relationship or connection was."<sup>64</sup> Any approach that rules out the relevance of any ancient backgrounds, settings, typologies, customs, or audiences will have a harder time

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<sup>64</sup> Welch, *Sermon at the Temple*; see all of chapter 7, especially pages 140–41.

accounting for the Book of Mormon than will an approach that allows that the text is ancient but was translated in the nineteenth century for a modern audience. In rejecting these elements, *New Approaches* offers us an approach that is not likely to bear much fruit, for it simply chops down the whole tree and tears out the root, hoping that some of the wood may be good for something else after it has been cut and dried.

Nevertheless, I am grateful to the authors in *New Approaches* who have made the effort to state their positions and to present their evidence. Through open discussion we have a better chance of understanding each other, provided the discussants maintain a posture of good will and openness toward each other and to the subject matter. I suspect that the essays in this issue of the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* will not be the final word on many of these issues, but I would hope that I have stated my points clearly and unoffensively and that this will be helpful in raising a few constructive questions, while putting a few other points to rest. In several of these cases, the participants have exchanged preliminary research memoranda, briefs have been filed by both sides, and now both parties have published reply briefs. At some point the discussants need to rest their cases and let the members of the jury deliberate. I hope that the facts are clear enough, the issues are properly framed, and the weight of the evidence is discernible. In my view, these "new approaches" to the Book of Mormon are not strong enough to carry a verdict.