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**Title** Text and Context

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**Abstract** Brent Lee Metcalfe's *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* was well received by those not favorable to the traditional truth claims of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. No articles indicating an ancient origin for the Book of Mormon were included. The book basically supports the assumption that the Book of Mormon isn't historical. Historians always bring their own perspective (including biases and agendas) into their histories.

## Text and Context

Daniel C. Peterson

As with a number of previous Signature publications, *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* received a hearty welcome from fundamentalist Protestant anti-Mormons. The Whittier, California, chapter of Concerned Christians and Former Mormons, for instance, devoted its August 1993 evening meeting to the theme "Mormon Scholars Question the Book of Mormon," and its newsletter hailed *New Approaches* in an article entitled "The Book of Mormon Continues Loosing [sic] Credibility." And, in a subsequent newsletter, they not only "highly recommend" the book, but announce that they have it for sale.<sup>1</sup> Jerald and Sandra Tanner's Utah Lighthouse Ministry likewise carries the book.<sup>2</sup> (Stan Larson's critique of 3 Nephi 12-14 had already received favorable attention from the Tanners long before it was incorporated into *New Approaches*.)<sup>3</sup> J.

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<sup>1</sup> *Concerned Christians and Former Mormons Newsletter* (August 1993): 1-2, 3; compare the *Newsletter* for December 1993, p. 6. See also Daniel C. Peterson, "Editor's Introduction: Questions to Legal Answers," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): xlvi-xlviii. Matt Paulson, an anti-Mormon freelancer based in Chino Hills, California, also welcomed the publication of "Mormon Brett [sic] Metchaf's [sic] *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*." "I will look forward," he writes, "to reading this new LDS book." (Matt Paulson, letter to Bob Durocher, 29 October 1993, p. 15.) In what sense, one wants to ask, is this an "LDS book"? In what sense, beyond mere survival in the membership records, is Brent Metcalfe a Mormon?

<sup>2</sup> See Bill McKeever, "Questioning Joseph Smith's Role as Translator," *Mormonism Researched* (Fall 1993): 4. Fully twenty-five percent of the non-Tanner books advertised in their November 1993 *Salt Lake City Messenger* are Signature titles. The Tanners have never offered F.A.R.M.S. publications for sale.

<sup>3</sup> *Salt Lake City Messenger* (January 1986); Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1990), 72-73. Incidentally, this and other books by the Tanners dealing with the Book of Mormon have been subjected to

Edward Decker's organization, Saints Alive in Jesus, which co-produces the "God Makers" movies, announced *New Approaches* in a "Special Update Report" for July 1993 (incorrectly claiming, along the way, that "every one of the contributors [to the Metcalfe volume] began the project believing that the Book of Mormon was a genuine ancient document"). *New Approaches* was the subject of the cover story in the Fall 1993 issue of "Mormonism Researched," the newsletter of Bill McKeever's California-based Mormonism Research Ministry. "Interesting," wrote Mr. McKeever, "is the fact that much of the rationale presented by these scholars is strikingly similar to the polemics which Christians [*sic*] have been raising for years."<sup>4</sup>

In 1992, I offered a fairly comprehensive portrait of what seems to me (and to others) a characteristic and unmistakable ideological tendency in many of Signature's productions.<sup>5</sup> There is no need to repeat that exercise here. Nonetheless, emboldened by Signature director Gary James Bergera's recent allowance, in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, that "Mr. Peterson and his associates are free to give vent to every expression they may experience [*sic*], however immature and tasteless,"<sup>6</sup> I should like to offer a few general remarks on the context from which *New Approaches* has emerged. It seems to me that the dispute between defenders of the Book of Mormon and the traditional truth claims of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, on the one hand, and those who would revise or redefine those truth claims, on the other, is as much a clash of opposing world views as a quibble over this or that piece of evidence. I shall also point to a crucial issue that the book raises but avoids. I cautiously hope that such remarks will be well received, along with the comments of the other contributors to this *Review*, since, according to a news report recently broadcast on Salt Lake City's KTVX-TV, "the editor of *New Approaches* welcomes criticism from LDS scholars and leaders."<sup>7</sup>

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lengthy and devastating criticism in volumes three, four, and five of the present *Review*, but the Tanners have failed to reply. One suspects they cannot.

<sup>4</sup> McKeever, "Questioning Joseph Smith's Role," 3.

<sup>5</sup> See Peterson, "Questions to Legal Answers," vii-lxxiii.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to the editor, *Salt Lake Tribune* (18 December 1993).

<sup>7</sup> As reported by Paul Murphy, KTVX-TV (Salt Lake City), 26 January 1994.

## It's Déjà Vu, All Over Again

More than two years ago, I wrote that

It is my opinion that several of the volumes published by Signature Books—enough to suggest a pattern—have been misleadingly packaged and marketed, and that, in more than one instance, their rhetoric has been disingenuous if not dishonest. Furthermore, Signature Books and George D. Smith seem, to me, to have a clear (if unadmitted) agenda, an agenda that is often hostile to centrally important beliefs of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>8</sup>

Nothing in *New Approaches* suggests to me any reason to change my opinion. All the typical elements of the Signature style are present, including the not altogether frank title,<sup>9</sup> the attempted resurrection of dead (and therefore unresisting)

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<sup>8</sup> For the full text of this statement, which originally appeared as a letter to the editor of several newspapers along the Wasatch Front, see Peterson, "Questions to Legal Answers," xvii–xviii.

<sup>9</sup> See the comments on this by John A. Tvedtnes, John Gee, John W. Welch, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, at pages 8, 52–53, 148, and 380, of the present *Review*. Compare Louis Midgley, "More Revisionist Legerdemain and the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 305–6; Stephen E. Robinson, review of Dan Vogel, ed., *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 317; Peterson, "Questions to Legal Answers," xxxv–xxxviii. One has to wonder, too, whether the biographical sketches given on pp. 445–46 of *New Approaches* are wholly adequate: For example, three of the ten contributors are said to be former employees of the Church's Translation Services Department. In only one of these cases are we told where the ex-employee works *now*. And is Edward H. Ashment really an active doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago? I have seen him so described for many years, but he apparently worked in Salt Lake City for a lengthy period after leaving Chicago and is now an insurance salesman in Manteca, California. Is he making real progress toward a degree? If he is not, isn't it somewhat disingenuous to continue to call him a "doctoral candidate"? And is Anthony Hutchinson, a foreign service officer currently living in the west African town of Cotonou, Benin, still an active doctoral candidate at the Catholic University of America? At every graduate school with which I am familiar, there is a time limit for such things.

General Authorities to endorse a book they never read,<sup>10</sup> the muddled and frequently even bogus religiosity,<sup>11</sup> the unmistakable agenda,<sup>12</sup> the relentless grinding of a revisionist ax.<sup>13</sup> One fact that needs to be pointed out from the beginning is that the essays in *New Approaches* were clearly not selected solely because they were new. In fact, some of them have been around for a while. Anthony Hutchinson's article, for instance, is a slightly revised paper from the May 1987 Washington Sunstone Symposium. Stan Larson's work on the Greek text of the Sermon on the Mount has been available since the mid-1980s.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Compare Midgley, "More Revisionist Legerdemain," 302–3 n. 66. One is, frankly, astonished to see Elders John A. Widtsoe and B. H. Roberts conscripted as supporters of the *New Approaches* agenda, when it is evident in the complete essays from which their dust jacket endorsements have been excerpted that they would have found it abhorrent. (See John A. Widtsoe, *In Search of Truth: Comments on the Gospel and Modern Thought* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1930], 81–93 [p. 82: "Many of those who have pursued higher criticism have done so to find support for their atheism"]; Brigham H. Roberts, "Higher Criticism and the Book of Mormon," *Improvement Era* 14/8 [June 1911]: 665–77; 14/9 [July 1911]: 774–86.)

<sup>11</sup> See Peterson, "Questions to Legal Answers," lxi–lxiv.

<sup>12</sup> In 1991, Signature Books claimed to find that the epithet "anti-Mormon" was libelous when applied to some of its authors. What, then, should we conclude from page six of the 1993–1994 Signature catalog? It announces the forthcoming publication of a book by the late Reverend Wesley P. Walters and the still-active H. Michael Marquardt, entitled *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record*. Can new Signature editions of the works of Jerald and Sandra Tanner be far behind? If Walters and Marquardt are not anti-Mormons, there are none. (For notable links of earlier Signature publications and authors to Reverend Walters, see Midgley, "More Revisionist Legerdemain," 297–300; 306–9; 310 n. 83; Peterson, "Questions to Legal Answers," xxxvi–xlvi. Even Dan Vogel, a regular at Signature Books and a contributor to *New Approaches*, describes Walters as "a well-known opponent of Mormonism"; see Dan Vogel, "Don't Label Me," *Dialogue* 22/1 [Spring 1989]: 6. Midgley, "More Revisionist Legerdemain," 284, terms Marquardt "an inveterate anti-Mormon publicist.")

<sup>13</sup> Consult Midgley, "More Revisionist Legerdemain," 310–11; Robinson, review of Vogel, ed., *The Word of God*, 312–18; Peterson, "Questions to Legal Answers," xlviii–liv; Louis C. Midgley, "George Dempster Smith, Jr., on the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): 5–12. "Revisionist" is a word that Signature Books uses to describe itself, e.g., on p. 29 of its 1993–1994 catalog.

<sup>14</sup> Stanley R. Larson, "The Sermon on the Mount: What Its Textual Transformation Discloses Concerning the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," *Trinity Journal* 7 (1986): 23–45. An even earlier version had been in circulation somewhat before this.

John Kunich's study of Book of Mormon demography was originally published in *Sunstone* in 1990, where it received sharp criticism, and the population issue has been a favorite anti-Mormon weapon for a century and a half.<sup>15</sup> Melodie Moench Charles's claim that the Book of Mormon teaches a modalistic christology is commonplace in anti-Mormon writing.<sup>16</sup> Yet, by contrast, no authentically new materials that might seem to indicate an ancient origin for the Book of Mormon (and there are a considerable number of them) managed to find their way into the book. Obviously, one of the principles—if, indeed, it was not the main principle—governing selection of the articles in *New Approaches* was ideological. These essays and ideas have a history, as do the publishing company and the editor that have brought them together.

In 1990, Brent Metcalfe was summoning us to “a more sensitive, responsible scholarship as well as a more honest faith”—a faith denying that Joseph Smith restored authentically ancient cosmological ideas. A faith that could have nothing to say about empirical reality. A faith realizing that what we have long believed to be actually true is in fact mere mythology.<sup>17</sup> This was the same invitation he had offered us in 1985, under the spell of a nonexistent “Oliver Cowdery history” dreamed up

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<sup>15</sup> John Kunich, “Multiply Exceedingly: Book of Mormon Population Sizes,” *Sunstone* 14/3 (June 1990): 27–44. Compare the letters from Tim Heaton and Kevin Christensen, in *Sunstone* 14/5 (October 1990): 4–5 and 15/1 (April 1991): 3–4, respectively. For some anti-Mormon treatments of the population issue, see E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: For the Author, 1834), 45; William Sheldon, *Mormonism Examined* (Brodhead, WI: By the Author, 1876), 110–12; M. T. Lamb, *The Golden Bible* (New York: Ward and Drummond, 1887), 96–100, 112–14, 126–33; Enos T. Hall, *The Mormon Bible* (Columbus, OH: Heer, 1899), 22–27; William E. Biederwolf, *Mormonism under the Searchlight* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 13–15; Thomas Key, “A Biologist Looks at the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 37/2 (June 1985): 98–99.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, James R. White, *Letters to a Mormon Elder* (Southbridge, MA: Crowne, 1990), 172–73; compare Latayne Colvett Scott, *The Mormon Mirage: A Former Mormon Tells Why She Left the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 168; Robert N. Hullinger, *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1980), 153.

<sup>17</sup> Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, “Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Cosmology,” in Dan Vogel, ed., *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 212.

by Mark Hofmann: "It does raise serious questions regarding the complete reliability of the traditional accounts," Mr. Metcalfe said of that supposed text, for which Hofmann had not even troubled to create a physical document. "Many, I suppose, will re-evaluate their belief structure in terms of the new information. Hopefully, it will take them to a more mature belief."<sup>18</sup> Even earlier, he had anticipated a similar transformation on the basis of Hofmann's fraudulent "salamander letter": "He believed the letter was incredibly significant, a document that ultimately would force the Mormon church to admit that its traditional history was not so simple as its missionaries made it sound. A former Mormon missionary himself, Metcalfe's primary ties to the church now consisted of an abiding interest in Mormon history and his devout extended family."<sup>19</sup>

In *New Approaches*, although the rhetoric is perhaps a degree more tentative and the attention now focuses directly on the Book of Mormon, the same agenda is clearly visible: Basic Latter-day Saint beliefs must be abandoned. Mr. Metcalfe speaks gently of "nontraditional views" and "pluralistic expressions of faith." "The application of literary- and historical-critical methods to the Book of Mormon," he modestly suggests, "allows for the possibility that it may be something other than literal history."<sup>20</sup> But the tentativeness is more stylistic than real. "The conclusion" advanced by *New Approaches*, as Signature publicist Ron Priddis summarizes it, "is that the Book of Mormon isn't historical. . . . The contributors . . . refute the claims made for it that it is the historical record of the ancient peoples of America."<sup>21</sup> Brent Lee Metcalfe himself quotes a psychiatrist who recalls "an aphorism that states that a myth is 'something

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<sup>18</sup> Michael White, "Find Contradicts Mormon Tradition," *Ogden Standard Examiner*, 15 May 1985. On Metcalfe, Hofmann, and the supposed Cowdery history, see Richard E. Turley, Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 325.

<sup>19</sup> Linda Sillitoe and Allen D. Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 24; compare Vern Anderson, "Scholars Doubt Book of Mormon's Antiquity," *Salt Lake Tribune* (5 June 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Preface," in Metcalfe, *New Approaches*, x.

<sup>21</sup> Rigney, "Signature Books Carries On." Incidentally, the Book of Mormon never purports to be "the historical record of [all] the ancient peoples of America."



that was never true and always will be!' This, I submit, will be the fate of this interesting Mormon scripture."<sup>22</sup>

Note, by the way, Ron Priddis's interesting use of the word "refute." *The Oxford American Dictionary* says that the verb "refute" means "to prove that [a statement or opinion or person] is wrong," and cautions that "It is incorrect to use *refute* to mean 'to deny' or 'to repudiate.'"<sup>23</sup> It is possible that Mr. Priddis has made a simple lexical error. I think it more likely, however, that he really does believe the question closed.<sup>24</sup> In his famous essay on "The Will to Believe," William James wrote of certain pseudo-empirical dogmatists "who believe so completely in an anti-Christian order of the universe that there is no living option: Christianity is a dead hypothesis from the start."<sup>25</sup> For many associated with Signature, it would seem that traditional Latter-day Saint belief, too, is a dead hypothesis. This may help to explain why some of them so contemptuously and constantly dismiss those of us connected with F.A.R.M.S. as mere pseudoscholarly "apologists": If a proposition is obviously, indisputably false, those who continue to defend it must necessarily be either self-deluded, incompetent, or dishonest. It's the way most of us would regard pyramidologists or advocates of a flat earth.

And what of the company that publishes *New Approaches*? Signature takes evident pride in the fact that many of the outspoken dissidents disciplined or excommunicated in certain recent controversial Church councils are close associates. "This year," says the company's current catalog, "three of our authors . . . as well as a director . . . were excommunicated from the Latter-day Saint Church for their writings. . . . Another director . . . resigned from Brigham Young University over restricted academic freedom."<sup>26</sup> It almost seems to be a kind of recurring

<sup>22</sup> Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Preface," in Metcalfe, *New Approaches*, xi.

<sup>23</sup> Edited by Eugene Ehrlich et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); emphasis in the original.

<sup>24</sup> This would seem to be the attitude of Roberts, "A Church Divided," 10, as well; compare Midgley, "George Dempster Smith, Jr.," 11 n. 13; also Turley, *Victims*, 93, on Brent Metcalfe.

<sup>25</sup> William James, *Pragmatism and Other Essays* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), 202. James explains what he means by "dead" and "live" hypotheses on page 194.

<sup>26</sup> Actually, as I understand it, we cannot know precisely what the reasons were for the excommunication of one of the authors, since he pointedly refused to attend any of the several disciplinary councils which considered his case and since the Church, following long-standing policy, will not

boast. "Of the six individuals who were disciplined by the LDS Church recently," remarks Ron Priddis, "we have published or are in some way affiliated with most of them."<sup>27</sup> But this is not all. Another Signature author, according to one published account, voluntarily left the Church in April 1992—rather incomprehensibly protesting alleged ecclesiastical violation of her "First Amendment rights"—while yet another has compared one of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to the fifteenth-century Spanish Inquisitor General Torquemada and denounced the Church itself as "totalitarian."<sup>28</sup>

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comment. To say that his writings occasioned his excommunication appears to be essentially speculative. Nevertheless, this statement is repeated constantly (as by Allen Roberts, "A Church Divided," *Private Eye Weekly* 10 [20 October 1993]: 12).

27 Rigney, "Signature Books Carries On." Sadly, even as I write, one of the *New Approaches* contributors, a friend of mine, apparently faces Church disciplinary action on a charge of apostasy.

28 Roberts, "A Church Divided," 10, 12. Alan Roberts, incidentally, is a Signature author and former editor of *Sunstone* who now coedits *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. His partner in that effort is Martha Sonntag Bradley, who is a member of Signature's board of directors. And it might interest some readers to see how the company intertwines with other institutions in the liberal Latter-day Saint community: Signature's director of publishing, Gary Bergera, is associate editor of *Dialogue*, while Susan Staker, editor of a Signature volume and sometime employee of the firm, is managing editor. *New Approaches* contributor Mark D. Thomas serves as "Scriptural Studies" editor of *Dialogue*. Fellow-contributors Melodie Moench Charles and David P. Wright serve on *Dialogue*'s board of editors along with occasional Signature employee Curt Bench and Signature authors Steven Epperson, D. Michael Quinn, Margaret Merrill Toscano, and John Sillito. (Mr. Sillito also serves on the board of directors of Signature, along with Michael Homer, who doubles as a member of *Dialogue*'s advisory committee.) Shane Bell, the office manager at *Dialogue*, is the editor of Signature's recent anthology of their self-styled "subversive" science fiction. Ron Priddis, Signature's publicist and a member of its board, is a U.S. correspondent for *Sunstone*, while Connie Disney, Signature's art director, serves on *Sunstone*'s advisory editorial board. Lavina Fielding Anderson, another member of the Signature board and a former associate editor of *Dialogue*, edits the *Journal of Mormon History* and the publications of the Association for Mormon Letters. George D. Smith, Jr., the owner and publisher of Signature Books, who formerly served on the advisory council of *Dialogue*, is currently a member of the National Advisory Board of the Sunstone Foundation. He seems also to have been a moving force behind the rather bizarre "Humanist/Mormon Dialogue" that was held at Salt Lake

On 31 October 1993, Gary James Bergera, the director of publishing for Signature Books, published an article in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, entitled "LDS Leaders Attack Intellectual Freedom." In it, he chastised the Church and its presiding officers for "paranoia," dishonesty, "blatant spiritual abuse," and "unrighteous dominion." He was referring, of course, to the same much-publicized Church councils. "These shameful, cowardly measures," he wrote (comparing them to the tactics of Satan as described in Latter-day Saint scripture), "are nothing more or less than a deliberate, carefully orchestrated attempt at the highest levels of church leadership to suppress scholarship, contrary opinion and the integrity of the human conscience."<sup>29</sup>

One might be forgiven for being slightly puzzled by such remarks, since Mr. Bergera directs a firm that, only slightly more than two years previously, had used threats of legal action in an effort to intimidate F.A.R.M.S. for having published a trio of critical book reviews.<sup>30</sup> It is evident, in fact, that Signature Books has a rather different view of free expression than most of the rest of us. While its admirers like to describe it as the "champion [of] subversive points of view," Signature itself appears to hold to its own brand of orthodoxy, which brooks little or no dissent.<sup>31</sup> "I have had ample opportunity," the well-known Mormon novelist Orson Scott Card wrote recently,

City's University Park Hotel on 24–26 September 1993, in which he and such Signature stalwarts as Allen Roberts, Martha Bradley, and Brent Metcalfe appeared alongside the well-known militant secularists Paul Kurtz and Gerald Larue.

<sup>29</sup> One might note in passing that this is rather strong language coming from someone who professes to disdain *ad hominem* attacks. Similarly, in a 110-word letter to the editor, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 18 December 1993, Mr. Bergera pronounces me "confused," says that I advocate and indeed glorify "character assassination and ad hominem attacks," accuses Professors Richard Lloyd Anderson, Louis C. Midgley, and Stephen E. Robinson of "libel," and dismisses all of us as "immature and tasteless." According to the current (1993–1994) Signature catalog (p. 29), the company "eschew[s] the obfuscation and character assassination employed against writers by disingenuous opponents." (All subsequent quotations from this catalog are taken from the same page, and so will not be separately footnoted.)

<sup>30</sup> For a fully documented discussion of this episode, see Peterson, "Questions to Legal Answers."

<sup>31</sup> The quotation is from Rigney, "Signature Books Carries On."

to observe that some supposed proponents of liberty for homosexuals do not believe in freedom of speech for anyone who disagrees with them. . . . For instance, Signature Books responded to publication of "The Hypocrites of Homosexuality" by suggesting to *Sunstone* magazine, where the essay appeared, that Signature might not be able to continue distributing that magazine if they continued to publish essays by me—a thinly veiled attempt to suppress my ability to get my writings published, even while Signature was still profiting from publication of my book *Saintspeak*, which I had sold to them under different editorial leadership. When I called Gary Bergera, editor of Signature Books, about his letter, he was apparently incapable of seeing that his attempt to get *Sunstone* to cease publishing my writings had anything to do with oppression. In his view, the cause of freedom requires Signature to make every effort to stop me from having a chance to speak a single word that might persuade someone that being a Latter-day Saint means trying to live by the gospel as taught by the prophets, while they insist on their own freedom to continue with their clear and relentless crusade to persuade Mormons to take currently fashionable worldly wisdom as a better source of truth than the teachings of the prophets.<sup>32</sup>

As the current (1993–1994) Signature Books catalog comments, "freedom of expression remains a rare commodity in many quarters."<sup>33</sup> Yet the company seems consistently to regard

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<sup>32</sup> Orson Scott Card, *A Storyteller in Zion: Essays and Speeches* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993), 187–88. The essay in question, "The Hypocrites of Homosexuality," originally published in *Sunstone* (February 1990), can be found reprinted at pp. 182–87 of *A Storyteller in Zion*.

<sup>33</sup> One is forcibly reminded of the Jewish commentator Dennis Prager's observation that, for many in the media, Christians who boycott companies that sponsor violent or sexually explicit television programs are "censors," while Hollywood actors who boycott allegedly "anti-gay" Colorado are "social activists." (See Dennis Prager, "Why I Am Not a Liberal; Part I: A Guide to the Liberal Use of Language," *Ultimate Issues* 9/3 [n.d.]: 12.) But the analogy breaks down, since the situation with Signature and its critics is asymmetrical: So far as I know, nobody is trying to suppress or censor Signature Books, nor has anyone threatened to take *them* to a court of law for expressing their views.

itself not as persecutor, but as victim of persecution. An article that appeared in the student newspaper of the University of Utah provides intriguing insight into the self-image of at least some at Signature.<sup>34</sup> "In the midst of [the] chilling intellectual climate" in contemporary Mormondom, we are told, "one Salt Lake publishing company, Signature Books, remains committed" to the cause of Truth.<sup>35</sup> And quite heroically, too. Ron Priddis, Signature's publicist, compares the company's writers of Mormon-related fiction to Alexander Solzhenitsyn: Apparently imprisoned in the Church in much the same way that Solzhenitsyn was immured in Stalin's Gulag, these daring figures manage to transmute unspeakable oppression into redemptive literature. In fact, says Priddis, Signature's fiction is "pretty subversive actually." He even describes a recent science fiction anthology whose "themes include what the Mormon church is up to in the year 2010. They've managed to implant something into artists' brains. And there's a handler on the computer trying to control them."

I wonder if I'm alone in finding this rather strange.

### On Sophistical Refutations

In December 1993, Gary James Bergera, Signature's director of publishing, announced to readers of the *Salt Lake Tribune* that "Mr. Peterson continues to insist that character assassination and ad hominem attacks are respected hallmarks of the intellectual enterprise."<sup>36</sup> But Mr. Bergera is wrong, and he is equivocating.<sup>37</sup> By *ad hominem* "attacks," he obviously means the use

<sup>34</sup> Rigney, "Signature Books Carries On."

<sup>35</sup> The wording here is intriguingly similar to a passage from the 1993-1994 Signature catalog, where, after summarizing the allegedly repressive situation in contemporary Mormondom, the odd little subsection entitled "Raison d'Être" declares that "In the midst of this environment we remain firmly committed to promoting the most articulate authors in this region."

<sup>36</sup> Letter to the editor, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 18 December 1993.

<sup>37</sup> "Straw man: A position, not in fact held by an opponent in an argument, which is invented and assailed in preference to attending to his actual stance. The adoption of this disreputable evasive tactic must suggest that the actual position is more defensible." (Antony Flew et al., *A Dictionary of Philosophy* [London: Pan Books, 1979], 317.) Mr. Bergera would presumably claim that he is summarizing the position expressed in Peterson, "Questions to Legal Answers," xxiv-xxxiii. This is hardly the

of insulting or abusive language. I do not advocate such rhetorical attacks. However, the classical *ad hominem* is an *argument*, and I do believe, along with virtually all logicians, that *ad hominem* arguments can be legitimate, relevant, and significant—provided their limitations are clearly understood and their conclusions properly weighted. Obviously, they can be abused. But they are by no means invariably fallacious.<sup>38</sup>

I will admit that this nuanced view of the subject runs counter to the way many people speak of arguments *ad hominem*.

In twentieth-century usage, an *ad hominem* argument is a device intended to divert attention from the critical examination of the substance of an argument, and to discredit that argument by dragging in irrelevant considerations having to do with the character or motives of its author. That this is a disreputable procedure is clear enough in cases where the argument itself is “followable”: in which those being addressed have the opportunity of addressing themselves systematically and exclusively to “relevant” considerations.<sup>39</sup>

The popular view, however, is inadequate. But we must be clear, in order to make sense of this, just what it is we are talking about here: An *ad hominem* argument is precisely that—an

first straw-man characterization to have been deployed against those with whom Signature disagrees: See Robinson, review of Vogel, ed., *The Word of God*, 316–17.

<sup>38</sup> See the discussion of Douglas N. Walton, *Informal Logic: A Handbook for Critical Argumentation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 134–71, with its additional references; also Joseph Gerard Brennan, *A Handbook of Logic*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 217; J. L. Mackie, “Fallacies,” in Paul Edwards, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 3:177–78; Richard L. Purtill, *Logical Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 57–58; Flew et al., *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 5; S. Morris Engel, *With Good Reason: An Introduction to Informal Fallacies*, 4th ed. (New York: St. Martin’s, 1990), 197. So far as I can determine, Aristotle’s *De sophisticis elenchis* omits the *argumentum ad hominem*—perhaps because it is not always fallacious.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 219.

argument. It can be a good or bad argument, valid or invalid, relevant or irrelevant. Insults, on the other hand, while they may in a sense be *ad hominem* (i.e., "against the man") are not arguments at all, neither of the *ad hominem* variety nor of any other. It is not entirely clear what Mr. Bergera has in mind. If we have made irrelevant *ad hominem* arguments, the proper response would be to identify these and to rebut them with counterarguments. This nobody at Signature has ever done. (Threats of legal action do not constitute cogent arguments.)<sup>40</sup> If, on the other hand, he wishes to charge us with insults or abuse, it is difficult to imagine that we have said anything that even approaches the sort of vituperative language that the good folks at Signature have used against F.A.R.M.S. and against leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (Words like "infantile," "dishonest," "cowardly," "self-serving," "paranoid," "self-righteous," "rationalizing," "obscurantist," "libelous," "tasteless," "spiritually abusive," "character assassination," "immature," "pseudo-scholarly," "confused," "scurrilous," and "Machiavellian" come immediately to mind, and there are many others.)<sup>41</sup>

But let's not waste time on such silly name-calling. What of the logic of argumentation? The uneven but fascinating book *Degenerate Moderns: Modernity as Rationalized Sexual Misbehavior*, by E. Michael Jones, will serve as an example of the logically legitimate use of *ad hominem* analysis.<sup>42</sup> With

40 Ward Parks, in his review of Gerald Graff's *Beyond the Culture Wars*, in *Academic Questions* 7/1 (Winter 1993-94): 94, observes of verbal browbeating (surely a more mild thing than legal pressure) that "This kind of tactic ought not to be used among scholars, because intimidation does not conduce to open intellectual exchange."

41 See Peterson, "Questions to Legal Answers," and the present "Editor's Introduction," throughout, for these examples and their supporting references. What Signature Books affects to disdain in F.A.R.M.S. as "immature," "tasteless," and "infantile," is, I think, simply the tendency of some of us to drollery (occasionally at their expense). And inviting them to "lighten up" will probably have no effect. *De gustibus non est disputandum*. Roberts, "A Church Divided," 11-12, echoes the usual epithets, but also appends the baseless, gossipy accusation—not even a pretense of evidence is offered—that F.A.R.M.S. has spied on dissidents and passed "intelligence information" on to a secret ecclesiastical committee. The accusation is not true.

42 E. Michael Jones, *Degenerate Moderns: Modernity as Rationalized Sexual Misbehavior* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993). William B. Ober, *Boswell's Clap and Other Essays: Medical Analyses of Literary Men's*

learning and passion, Jones shows repeatedly how certain influential theories, writings, and works of art—among them several that substantially define the cultural environment in which we now live—grew organically from the often warped and immoral lives of those who produced them. This should hardly come as a surprise. No less a figure than the great William James had already argued in his essay “The Will to Believe” against the myth that anyone—even anyone affiliated with Signature Books—chooses his attitude toward issues of cosmic or life-orientational significance on the basis of pure, abstract reason alone. But Jones goes further. With great plausibility, he reads Margaret Mead’s now discredited account of an idyllic Samoan paradise of guiltless free love as an implicit defense of her own marital infidelities. He shows that Sigmund Freud’s theories are intimately related to the first psychoanalyst’s own sexual urges and sexual sins. Pablo Picasso’s paintings image the artist’s checkered sexual career. Even Alfred Kinsey’s studies of human sexuality, purportedly based on hard statistical data but now known to be far wide of the mark, seem to have been distorted to a great extent by Kinsey’s own (possibly homosexual, certainly odd) personality. “Far from being two mutually exclusive compartments hermetically sealed off from each other, the intellectual life turns out to be a function of the moral life of the thinker.”<sup>43</sup>

And, through it all, on the part of the intellectuals discussed, there runs a solid thread of hostility toward religion—and toward its moral demands. Sometimes this hostility took the shape of formal critique: “Freud, we are told with a tendentiousness that suffuses [Peter] Gay’s entire biography, ‘sharply differentiat[ed] the scientific style of thought from the Illusion-ridden style of religious thinking’ . . . ‘Science,’ Gay tells us, ‘is an

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*Afflictions* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988) might serve as another example: Ober argues that medical problems affected, and indeed often shaped, the works of such writers as Swinburne, Keats, Chekhov, and Plato. Paul Johnson’s brilliant *Intellectuals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), by contrast, could well be used in an illegitimate *argumentum ad hominem*, since, although it demonstrates in appalling detail that many icons of the modern age were utter scoundrels, it exhibits no organic relationship between their depravity and their intellectual output. Indeed, Johnson delights in showing massive inconsistencies between private lives and public postures.

<sup>43</sup> Jones, *Degenerate Moderns*, 258.



organized effort to get beyond childishness. Science disdains the pathetic effort of the believer to realize fantasies through pious waiting and ritual performances, through sending up petitions and burning heretics.'"<sup>44</sup> Jones sees the period of secularization following the French Revolution as crucial. "The intellectual," he says, "is a peculiarly modern invention, whose rise is predicated upon the demise of the Church as a guide to life."<sup>45</sup> In the weakest chapter of his book (weak because too heavily colored by his own seemingly Counterreformation Catholicism), Jones briefly discusses the career of Martin Luther. While his analysis here is not wholly convincing, the model he proposes is abundantly documented in his book as a whole: "Throughout the second decade of the sixteenth century, Luther became involved in a spiritual downward spiral in which, as is the case with an embodied spirit, spiritual laxity led to sensuality, which in turn led to intellectual rebellion against the discipline of the Church, which led to further sensual decline and further rage against the Church that upheld the standards he soon felt no longer capable of keeping."<sup>46</sup>

As so often, the Book of Mormon, which many critics would have us believe simply gushed forth from the "marvelously fecund imagination" of an unreflective New York farmboy "like a spring freshet,"<sup>47</sup> is relevant to this question. When Korihor is struck dumb before Alma, the chief judge, he writes a note, saying, among other things,

I always knew that there was a God. But behold, the devil hath deceived me. . . . And he said unto me: There is no God; yea, and he taught me that which I should say. And I have taught his words; and I taught them *because they were pleasing unto the carnal mind*; and I

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 164, citing Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1988), 531, 534.

<sup>45</sup> Jones, *Degenerate Moderns*, 15; cf. Johnson, *Intellectuals*, 1; see also Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander*, 286, on Brent Metcalfe: "He saw the church's revelatory claims closely bound to the church's requirements for individuals. When one couldn't take the church's claims literally, he concluded, then neither need one take literally the church's commands."

<sup>46</sup> Jones, *Degenerate Moderns*, 246.

<sup>47</sup> The phrases are drawn from Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1975), 44, 27.

taught them, even until I had much success, insomuch that I verily believed that they were true.<sup>48</sup>

As further illustration, we might add the example of the famous Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. According to his wife's eloquent and candid reminiscences, this titanic twentieth-century figure led a sordid life of fornication, multiple adulteries, red light districts, sex shows, and bohemian debauches. She shared unhesitatingly in it all, and even contributed an element of lesbianism to the blend. Nevertheless, as might have been predicted, the end result was pain. "I was nothing," she said, "but a piece of bleeding, tortured womanhood seeking my peace from the seesaw of suffering and hate."<sup>49</sup> "Our marriage had been broken into small pieces by the relentless assault of the many women—not only his sweetheart who functioned as his secretary and who had lived across the street from us in New York, but the émigré friends, newcomers, students, socialites, wives of friends."<sup>50</sup> Yet she continued to admire him. Her autobiography, in fact, is an act of near-worship. ("I never go to church," she says.)<sup>51</sup>

The seduction of women was not a matter of individual attraction. It was an act of submission to the power of the female. He transmuted his personal experience by shaping it into golden words meant for a world audience. He forsook life for the word. His knowledge of love was not personal. He dove into it and then formulated its cosmic aspects with words. Mother Earth gave Paulus the final power, that of transgressing life for the sake of

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48 Alma 30:52–53 (emphasis added). Hugh Nibley ("Last Call: An Apocalyptic Warning," in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989], 510) suggests, on the basis of Alma 30:17–18, that Korihor may have been a homosexual whose theology flowed directly from his and his followers' need for self-justification.

49 Hannah Tillich, *From Time to Time* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), 241. I thank Professor Louis Midgley for reminding me of Tillich's case, as well as for drawing my attention to Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), which, examining a significant strand of intellectual life in Central Europe and the United States during this century, supplies a confirmatory second witness to both the character of Paul Tillich and the general thesis of E. Michael Jones.

50 Tillich, *From Time to Time*, 240.

51 *Ibid.*, 239.

the spirit. He was an eternally suffering, Christian saint.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, his wife herself sees an intimate link between Paul Tillich's lifestyle and his theology. Finding pornographic letters and photographs in his desk along with the manuscripts "that were supposed to contain his spiritual harvest," she "was tempted to place between the sacred pages of his highly esteemed lifework those obscene signs of the real life that he had transformed into the gold of abstraction—King Midas of the spirit."<sup>53</sup> And what was that gold? Among other things, Tillich's theology denied supernaturalism, the existence of a personal God (and, indeed, strictly speaking, the "existence" of any God at all), and, consequently, the binding or normative character of biblical or traditional Judeo-Christian ethics.<sup>54</sup>

In the brilliant third chapter of *Degenerate Moderns*, entitled "Homosexual as Subversive," E. Michael Jones demonstrates the crucial and explanatory role of personal lifestyle not only in the traitorous career of Sir Anthony Blunt, but in the theories of John Maynard Keynes, the biographical writings of Lytton Strachey, and the novels of E. M. Forster. "Modernity was the exoteric version of Bloomsbury biography; it was a radically homosexual vision of the world and therefore of its very nature subversive; treason was its logical outcome. . . . The Bloomsberries' public writings—Keynes' economic theories, Strachey's best-selling *Eminent Victorians*, etc.—were the sodomitical vision for public consumption."<sup>55</sup> Reflecting upon the development of the characters in Forster's long-suppressed book, *Maurice*, Jones notes that, "In the world of this novel it's hard to tell whether declining religious faith fosters homosexuality or whether homosexuality kills faith. At any rate Forster sees a connection. . . . As their involvement in sodomy increases, so also does their opposition to Christianity."<sup>56</sup>

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52 Ibid., 24.

53 Ibid., 241.

54 One is tempted to compare Paul Tillich's unpleasant passing—oppressed by horrible images and fear; assured by his doctor that this was no near-death experience, merely hallucination (but not fully believing the assurances)—with that of Korihor as described in Alma 30:60; see *ibid.*, 220–24.

55 Jones, *Degenerate Moderns*, 55, 61.

56 *Ibid.*, 63.

“That denial of the truths one can know about God should lead to sodomy is in some sense a mystery,” concludes Jones. “However, it is a mystery that can be fairly well documented, from Paul’s epistle to the Romans to any objective view of modern British history.”<sup>57</sup> In any event, it seems clear that immorality (not merely of the homosexual variety) and intellectual apostasy are, and always have been, frequent (though not invariable) companions. (Joseph Smith’s famous announcement of a link between adultery and sign-seeking is apropos here.)<sup>58</sup> Sodom and Cumorah are apparently not compatible.

The illustrious early twelfth-century Muslim philosophical theologian al-Ghazālī noted the same linkage in his day:

Now, I have observed that there is a class of men who believe in their superiority to others because of their greater intelligence and insight. They have abandoned all the religious duties Islam imposes on its followers. They laugh at the positive commandments of religion which enjoin the performance of acts of devotion, and the abstinence from forbidden things. They defy the injunctions of the Sacred Law. Not only do they overstep the limits prescribed by it, but they have renounced the Faith altogether.<sup>59</sup>

It is certainly not irrelevant to this theme that Abū ‘Ubayd al-Juzjānī, the admiring disciple and biographer of one of those of whom al-Ghazālī spoke, the famous eleventh-century Perso-Arab philosopher Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), thought that “the Master’s” relatively early death occurred because of his overindulgence in sexual pleasures.<sup>60</sup>

It must be clearly understood that I am not charging any particular individual, at Signature or anywhere else, with sexual immorality. I have used rather dramatic examples in order to make the case that writers are reflected in what they write. Human

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>58</sup> See Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1972), 278; cf. Matthew 12:39.

<sup>59</sup> Sabih Ahmad Kamali, trans., *Al-Ghazali's Tahafut al-Falasifah [Incoherence of the Philosophers]* (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1963), 1.

<sup>60</sup> See the translation of al-Juzjānī’s biography included in Arthur J. Arberry, *Avicenna on Theology* (London: Murray, 1951), 22–23.

beings are not asocial, ahistorical, disembodied intellects. Clearly, considerations of the total personality of the individual advancing a theory, writing a book, or painting a picture may be entirely germane and legitimate in analysis of what that individual produces. Having once established that *ad hominem* analysis can be relevant, it then becomes merely a question of when and how much it should be used. The degree of relevance will vary, of course, according to the nature of the dispute and, perhaps even more importantly, according to the nature of the subject matter in question. Personal character is of relatively little importance in discussions of physical science and mathematical theory, although even here it must sometimes be taken into account.<sup>61</sup> But it can be of great or even central relevance in matters of political thought, ethical speculation, historiography, literature, and theology. As one eminent biblical scholar has observed, "The historian's own presuppositions, ideology, and attitudes inevitably influence his or her research and reporting. Perhaps it is not an overstatement to say that any history book reveals as much about its author as it does about the period of time treated."<sup>62</sup> "Good historians (like experts in other fields) have a 'feel' for their subject and can make inspired guesses, without being able to state explicitly how they know."<sup>63</sup> Bad historians, in contrast, presumably lack such a "feel" and therefore make analogous guesses that turn out to be *uninspired*. One of the characteristics of historiography is its "inevitable subjectivity."<sup>64</sup> Thus, to portray *ad hominem* arguments as always and everywhere inevitably fallacious is, in itself, a gross logical error. While, of itself, *ad hominem* analysis cannot be used to discredit a writer's argument or evidence, it can certainly alert us to cases where caution should be exercised, to instances where we should be especially alert. Peter Novick explains this well:

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<sup>61</sup> For human factors in mathematical logic, see William Barrett, *The Illusion of Technique: A Search for Meaning in a Technological Civilization* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979), 3-117.

<sup>62</sup> J. Maxwell Miller, "Reading the Bible Historically: The Historian's Approach," in Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, eds., *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 12.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Stanford, *The Nature of Historical Knowledge* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 22.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

The impersonal ethos of science is based on the proposition that what science offers is "public knowledge," subject to critical examination by the scientific community. The "replicable experiment" is the prime example of this characteristic of science. . . . The assimilation of historical knowledge to this model was . . . a key move in the establishment of objective, scientific history. On this assumption, *ad hominem* arguments are surely an irrelevancy, and should be scornfully dismissed.

But are the characteristic products of historians like this? The historian has seen, at first hand, a great mass of evidence, often unpublished, and difficult of access. The historian develops an interpretation of this evidence based on years of immersion in the material—together, of course, with the perceptual apparatus and assumptions he or she brings to it. Historians employ devices, the footnote being the most obvious example, to attain for their work something resembling "replicability," but the resemblance is not all that close.

Most historical writing is, at best, "semipublic." . . . The historian is less like the author of a logical demonstration, though he or she is that in part; more like a witness to what has been found on a voyage of discovery. And arguments which are illegitimate when addressed to the author of a transparently followable syllogism are quite appropriate in the case of a witness.<sup>65</sup>

Samuel Butler's warning is apt: "Though God cannot alter the past," he reflected, "historians can."<sup>66</sup> One standard book on logic and scientific methodology acknowledges that "the individual motives of a writer are altogether irrelevant in determining the logical force of his argument, that is, whether certain premises are or are not sufficient to demonstrate a certain conclusion." But the same book proceeds to point out that "certain motives weaken our competence and our readiness to observe

<sup>65</sup> Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 219–20. Again, I thank Louis Midgley for reminding me of Novick's discussion.

<sup>66</sup> Samuel Butler, *Erewhon Revisited* (London: Richards, 1901), ch. 14.

certain facts or to state them fairly. Hence, the existence of such motives, if such existence can be proved in any given case, is relevant to determine the credibility of a witness."<sup>67</sup> And the potential existence of such factors is relevant in the particular case of *New Approaches*, since, here as elsewhere, prejudices and desires can cloud one's judgment. Excessive eagerness, for example, can blunt one's discrimination.

Although the justification of a proposition is independent of our passions, the formation of belief is not. Desire is very influential. If we desire to believe something, we will probably be disposed to believe with less evidence than if we did not desire to believe it. Similarly, if we desire to believe that something is not the case, we will probably be disposed to this belief with less evidence than if we had no such desire.<sup>68</sup>

Nobody is exempt from such temptations, of course. But consider the case of the editor of *New Approaches*, as he is described in the confessions of the notorious forger and murderer Mark Hofmann: "One thing about Metcalfe is he's always interested in these little hidden rumors or truths or whatever. And I noticed I could throw out a little thing to whet his appetite and he would always be after me for more and more information. So I would just make it up as we went along."<sup>69</sup> Hofmann evidently invented the whole Oliver Cowdery history over a hamburger at a fast food joint, and "he told Brent Metcalfe that it existed because it excited Brent."<sup>70</sup> "As intriguing as the Cowdery history was," however, "Brent Metcalfe was even more excited by Hofmann's apparent discovery of some of the missing 116 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript"—which allegedly linked the (supposedly fictional) prophet Lehi with

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<sup>67</sup> Morris R. Cohen and Ernest Nagel, *An Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1934), 180.

<sup>68</sup> Paul Hedengren, *In Defense of Faith: Assessing Arguments against Latter-day Saint Belief* (Provo: Bradford and Wilson, 1985), 22–23.

<sup>69</sup> *Mark Hofmann Interviews*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Office of Salt Lake County Attorney, 1987), 2:454; compare the similar language at 2:456. I have corrected a couple of obvious spelling errors; cf. Royal Skousen, page 136, in this volume.

<sup>70</sup> *Mark Hofmann Interviews*, SS–14; compare the similar language at 2:456. For the story of the Cowdery history, see Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander*, 295–96.

nineteenth-century money-digging.<sup>71</sup> As for the famous "salamander letter," Hofmann remarked that "People read into it what they want or get out of it what they want. I know that really turned on Brent Metcalfe, for example."<sup>72</sup> An associate of Steven Christensen reported that, in or just before 1985, "Metcalfe told him about the salamander letter with glee and an expectation that [his] faith would be shaken."<sup>73</sup> Similarly, the widely respected non-Mormon historian Jan Shipps recalls Mr. Metcalfe's eager desire to use the salamander letter "to impugn the LDS foundation story" and "[call] the integrity of the prophet into question." (He was not, it seems, merely a dispassionate investigator.) Or consider Professor Shipps's comment that Mr. Metcalfe's "interpretations of the data in the historical record were generally very wide of the mark" owing to his lack of academic training, although he was nonetheless "clearly intoxicated . . . with the idea that he possessed knowledge that would alter the world's understanding of the beginnings of Mormonism."<sup>74</sup> Intoxication is hardly an asset to accurate scholarship.

And there is a further important reason to attend to the personality and character of the historian. One might take as an illustration a historian researching English Tudor social conditions or Victorian intellectual life. "It is not enough to read the documents; one must make a mental reconstruction of that sixteenth- or nineteenth-century world. In doing so, one inevitably brings one's individually acquired cognitive structures to historical understanding."<sup>75</sup> As J. Maxwell Miller says,

Basic to modern historiography is the principle of "analogy." Historians assume, consciously or unconsciously, that the past is analogous to the present and that one human society is analogous to another. Thus a historian's understanding of present reality serves as an overriding guide for evaluating evidence and interpreting the past, and the cultural patterns of a better-known

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<sup>71</sup> Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander*, 296

<sup>72</sup> *Mark Hofmann Interviews*, 2:441.

<sup>73</sup> Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander*, 285.

<sup>74</sup> Turley, *Victims*, 93. Professor Shipps's description of Mr. Metcalfe's behavior in connection with the salamander letter is fascinating, and quite revealing. For Mark Hofmann's low opinion of Mr. Metcalfe as a historian, see *Mark Hofmann Interviews*, 2:489-90.

<sup>75</sup> Stanford, *The Nature of Historical Knowledge*, 16.



society may be used as a guide for clarifying those of a lesser-known society.<sup>76</sup>

This is perhaps a reasonable principle—and not merely a modern one, since it also permeates the work of the great fourteenth-century Arab historian Ibn Khaldūn. But “the resulting problems of accuracy, distortion, misunderstanding, omissions, and so on, are obvious and enormous.”<sup>77</sup> Clearly, if there were no similarities between the historian’s society and that which is the object of his studies, if the latter were *ganz anders*, he could never hope to understand it at all. But the opposite and probably more serious danger is that the historian will assimilate the people he or she is studying too closely to his or her own world of experience. (Think of those medieval and Renaissance painters of Europe who dress the Holy Family up as if they were Venetian grandees and make them flee into an Egypt that looks remarkably like Flanders or the Swiss Alps.) Thus, for instance, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century orientalist equated the Islamic caliphate with the Roman papacy, described classical Islamic society as “feudal,” viewed the rise of Iranian Shī‘ism in terms derived from European theories of race and nationality, and spoke comfortably of an Islamic “church.” Yet none of these categories is really applicable to Islam, and the theories erected on the basis of such notions are now generally recognized to be seriously if not fatally flawed.

Another notable drawback to this “principle of analogy” is that it can have unhealthy consequences when applied to the study of religion. It leaves virtually no room for miracles or for special revelation, which are by definition exceptional, untypical.<sup>78</sup> Thus, for instance, while the Bible depicts a world in

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<sup>76</sup> Miller, “Reading the Bible Historically,” 12. On p. 14, Miller comments that, “Other than this principle of analogy, . . . there is no specific methodology for historical research.” This seems to contradict directly the oft-expressed claim of such *New Approaches* authors as Brent Lee Metcalfe and Edward H. Ashment. Compare Wilfred M. McClay, “Clio in 2013: The Writing and Teaching of History in the Next Twenty Years,” *Academic Questions* 7/1 (Winter 1993–94): 24–25; David B. Honey and Daniel C. Peterson, “Advocacy and Inquiry in the Writing of Latter-day Saint History,” *BYU Studies* 31 (Spring 1991): 139–79.

<sup>77</sup> Stanford, *The Nature of Historical Knowledge*, 16.

<sup>78</sup> “In dealing with ultimate religious matters, we are dealing with the extraordinary, with matters much higher and deeper than those we ordinarily contemplate. This much must be admitted by anyone.” So Thomas

which God actively intervenes—in which he rolls back the waters to enable the Israelites to escape from Pharaoh, appears to prophets, sends angels to defend Jerusalem against besieging Assyrians, speaks from burning bushes, writes his law on tablets of stone, causes ax heads to float, and raises corpses from the grave—modern Western historians tend not to have had such experiences.

One of the standard tenets of modern historiography is that a natural explanation for a given historical phenomenon or event is preferable to an explanation that involves overt divine intervention. When speculating about the “actual historical events” behind the biblical account of Israel’s past, therefore, what historians often do, in effect, is bring the biblical story into line with reality as we moderns perceive it.<sup>79</sup>

According to the dominant world view of Western modernity, angels probably do not exist at all. And even if they do, says this view, they certainly do not play the role in ordinary reality that the Bible seems to ascribe to them. Dead people do not return from the tomb. So a search is launched for a “more reasonable” explanation of the biblical events in which angels are said to figure, or in which the dead come back to life—“more reasonable” in the sense that it is more in keeping with our modern Western perception of reality.<sup>80</sup> Accordingly, a plague must have broken out among the Assyrian troops. Or Jesus’ disciples were simply so overwhelmed by his vivid personality that they imagined him to have transcended death. In any event, modern biblical historiography—Rudolf Bultmann might serve as our model here—reaches almost instinctively for naturalistic counterexplanations. But it is far from obvious that contemporary Western secularism enjoys privileged access to reality. Religious believers have grounds to question it. And for Latter-day Saints, to whom the Restoration represents God’s program to break the strangling grip of apostasy on our world, there seems no com-

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V. Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 24.

<sup>79</sup> Miller, “Reading the Bible Historically,” 12.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

elling reason to acquiesce in the theological presuppositions of the dominant culture. Surely it is legitimate to ask what assumptions undergird a historian's analogical reconstruction of past reality, and to inquire whether that historian's ideological and experiential limitations deserve to be universalized and imposed upon the past.

Books in general, and history books in particular, don't just happen. They represent human acts. And, as one recent writer on the nature of historiography has pointed out, "every great narrative history"—and there seems no real reason to limit his point to narrative—"proceeds from some ruling idea, a controlling center which, like the vanishing point of perspective drawing, pulls everything in the picture into finite relationship with everything else." Moreover, "this ruling idea is rarely, if ever, simply deduced or induced from an examination of the components of the picture. Instead, the ruling idea is itself the precondition of there being any coherent picture at all."<sup>81</sup> It is the historian himself who brings this ruling idea to his work, at least partially from outside his work. A case in point is the famous *Outline of History*, published by H. G. Wells in 1920. Relentlessly, page after page, he hammers home the same themes that drive his novels: the need for a collectivist world state, the eventual replacement of religion and traditional morality by science.<sup>82</sup> Or one might mention Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall's path-breaking *Geschichte der Assassinen*, published in 1818, which, although its ostensible subject is the history of a medieval Islamic sect, is really a thinly veiled polemic against "secret societies" like the Freemasons and the Jesuits. Yet another famous example is Edward Gibbon's massive eighteenth-century masterpiece, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Written under the unmistakable influence of David Hume's skepticism and the Deists' rationalism, the whole point of the work is to illustrate Gibbon's contention that the fall of Rome represents, simultaneously and almost interchangeably, "the triumph of barbarism and religion" (i.e., Christianity).

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<sup>81</sup> McClay, "Clio in 2013," 24–25.

<sup>82</sup> For a brief sketch of H. G. Wells, see Hadley Arkes, "The Displeasure of His Company," *National Review* 46/1 (24 January 1994): 62–65. *The Outline of History* made Wells an international intellectual icon. The famous Turkish leader Kemal Atatürk, for instance, locked himself in his room, fortified himself with black coffee, and read the two large volumes through in one sitting.

While we can now easily identify and adjust for the biases of Wells and Gibbon and Hammer-Purgstall and a host of lesser writers, this is not always so simple. And it is especially difficult to do when we encounter the more impersonal, less obviously partisan, historiographical style in vogue today. Yet "ruling ideas" are no less present in contemporary historical writing than they were in earlier eras. For historians cannot fail to have them. They are essential before one can even begin to frame the questions that lead to a search for relevant data. Without them, all is chaos (or, at best, mere chronology). "A barefoot walk through mountains of evidence generally produces little more than ink-stained feet."<sup>83</sup> It seems to follow, therefore, since the "ruling idea" of a given work of historiography is logically prior to that work of historiography—although it may or may not be explicitly present in it—that criticism of the work may well require identification and criticism of the idea as well as of the work itself. Of course, if a historian is forthright about his or her ideological leanings, personal interests, or agenda, relatively little additional discussion will be necessary. If, however, there is reason to suspect that personal interests or biases or agendas are being concealed, for whatever reason, such issues will loom large, and it will become important for those who wish to evaluate that historian's work to discover what those factors might be.

And it seems right and proper to do so, particularly in cases where historical writing seeks to influence important beliefs, practices, or allegiances in our present time. The majority of us adopt most of our beliefs on the basis of others' authority. "Our reason is quite satisfied, in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of every thousand of us, if we can find a few arguments that will do to recite in case our credulity is criticized by some one else. Our faith is faith in some one else's faith, and in the greatest matters this is most the case."<sup>84</sup> Since that is, in fact, the native human tendency—and, given the various constraints of mortality, all but inevitable—it is of immense importance to us that we know whether those who would guide us on questions of cosmic importance have secret agendas that, if we knew of

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<sup>83</sup> McClay, "Clio in 2013," 25; compare Honey and Peterson, "Advocacy and Inquiry," 139–79.

<sup>84</sup> James, *Pragmatism and Other Essays*, 199 ("The Will to Believe").

them, would offend us, or unstated reasons for persuading us to take a course we might otherwise reject. And, since our generation, perhaps more than any previous one, is acutely aware of the degree to which historical accounts and philosophical theories and political arguments and theological views are filtered through the lens of the preconceptions, interests, and goals of those who construct them—this being the central and most valuable insight of currently fashionable critical theories and the so-called “hermeneutics of suspicion”—it should be obvious that those preconceptions, interests, and goals demand the closest examination. To accept the authority of others because of their (real or imagined) prestige, without understanding what those others are really about, is a dangerous course. Al-Ghazālī, for example, knew it to be dangerous and unwise in the twelfth-century Near East: Of his contemporaries who were bowled over by Hellenistic philosophy, the most prestigious system of thought in his day, he wrote,

When such stuff was dinned into their ears, and struck a responsive chord in their hearts, the heretics in our times thought that it would be an honour to join the company of great thinkers for which the renunciation of their faith would prepare them. . . . They flattered themselves with the idea that it would do them honour not to accept even truth uncritically. But they had actually begun to accept falsehood uncritically. They failed to see that a change from one kind of intellectual bondage to another is only a self-deception, a stupidity.<sup>85</sup>

None of us has the time or the resources to verify the references in every book we read. We have to assume that evidence is properly evaluated and honestly used. And the need for trust is even more acute when reference is made to evidence that, by its nature, we *cannot* examine for ourselves. For instance, a cursory survey of the bibliographies of *New Approaches* discloses, besides archival sources and private communications and theses and such materials, at least ten unpublished Sunstone and other symposium papers and ten additional items described as “privately circulated.” Despite repeated requests, and even despite offers of trades, Brent Metcalfe has declined to furnish

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85 Kamali, *Al-Ghazali's Tahafut al-Falasifah*, 2.

us copies of these items. One is forcibly reminded, again, of the nonexistent "Oliver Cowdery history," on the basis of which the future editor of *New Approaches* once looked forward to a "more mature" Mormonism: "Metcalf said he obtained excerpts of the Cowdery history from an individual, whom he declined to identify, who had read the work and copied portions of it."<sup>86</sup> Any "facts" about the supposed history had, therefore, to be accepted on the basis of trust in Brent Metcalfe, and in his judgment. During an interview with KUER Radio in Salt Lake City on 17 May 1985, Mr. Metcalfe was asked, "Would you like to name [your] source?" "No," he replied. "All I can say is that it's an extremely reliable source and I know, personally I know of no other sources that are more reliable than this one."<sup>87</sup> Later, of course, police investigators learned that Mr. Metcalfe's source was Mark Hofmann.

When writers summarize inaccessible materials for us, or use them to construct arguments, we are asked, in effect, to trust their use of things that we ourselves are very unlikely to see. Are these documents reliable? Are they accurately understood? Competently employed? We cannot directly know. Questions of an author's agenda, methodology, character, even his temperament, are entirely relevant in these cases. And, as William J. Hamblin and others have demonstrated at numerous points in the preceding reviews, Brent Lee Metcalfe and some of his co-authors cannot always be relied upon to summarize even publicly available documents accurately, or to restate fairly the arguments of those who disagree with them.<sup>88</sup>

To ensure that my own contention here is fairly restated, let me do it myself: The biases, ideology, interests, agenda, and even character of a historian are sometimes relevant, and occasionally very relevant, to any full evaluation of that historian's

<sup>86</sup> White, "Find Contradicts Mormon Tradition."

<sup>87</sup> Cited by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *The Mormon Murders: A True Story of Greed, Forgery, Deceit, and Death* (New York: New American Library, 1988), 200. On p. 199, they speak of Mr. Metcalfe's "irrepressible enthusiasm for secrets." On 13 June 1985, John Dart of the *Los Angeles Times* published an article about the spurious Cowdery history—based on an interview, arranged for him by Brent Metcalfe, with the same anonymous but "extremely reliable source" (*ibid.*, 207-9).

<sup>88</sup> The story related by Jerald Tanner in the *Salt Lake City Messenger* 59 (January 1986): 17-19 may be relevant to this issue.

arguments. However, readers of this issue of the *Review* will have discovered that it rarely if ever relies on the *argumentum ad hominem*. In fact, they might amuse themselves by keeping tabs on the types of mistakes the reviewers do identify. Broadly speaking, in any kind of argumentation, there are errors of fact and errors of logic, along with various hybrids in between. A pair of examples should suffice to make this clear. Thus, all of the facts or premises of an argument might be false, but the argument might still be logically valid, as in the following hypothetical case:

Charles de Gaulle was Japanese.  
 All Japanese are tigers.  
 Therefore, Charles de Gaulle was a tiger.

If one were to accept these premises, one would be logically bound to accept the argument's conclusion, as well. It is imperative, therefore, to check whether the purported "facts" are true. On the other hand, completely accurate information may be so combined that the argument it forms is invalid. It is true, of course, that invalid arguments can often result, by sheer chance, in accurate conclusions. For instance,

Charles de Gaulle was French.  
 $2 + 2 = 4$ .  
 Therefore, all French are mammals.<sup>89</sup>

Usually, though, invalid arguments lead to unsound conclusions. And there are, as the contributors to this volume of the *Review* have pointed out, plenty of both in the essays they discuss. To borrow a line from a recent response to a revisionist book in biblical studies, "The combination of errors of fact and unsoundness of method is very serious."<sup>90</sup> Something else to look for: The author of that review says of John Van Seters's *Prologue to History* that it "gives great weight to tiny points of detail—points that could be explained in various ways other than his—while disregarding masses of cumulative evidence that

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<sup>89</sup> This example, with the previous one, is taken from Jonathan Gorman, *Understanding History: An Introduction to Analytical Philosophy of History* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 1992), 45.

<sup>90</sup> Richard Elliot Friedman, "Late for a Very Important Date," review of John Van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis*, in *Bible Review* 9/6 (December 1993): 13.

point elsewhere."<sup>91</sup> Readers of *New Approaches* should ask themselves whether Brent Metcalfe's book is vulnerable to similar criticism. How, to choose a favorite issue of mine, do the authors of these revisionist essays come to grips with the testimonies of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon?<sup>92</sup> I'll give my impression: They try, once or twice, to brush them aside, but, basically, they ignore them. This, however, will not do at all. Not at all. (Mark Twain tried to dismiss the witnesses by remarking, ironically, that he "could not feel more satisfied and at rest if the entire Whitmer family had testified." He was no more successful at disposing of their testimonies than the authors of *New Approaches* are, but at least his quip was slightly *funny*.)<sup>93</sup> Have the authors of these essays come even close to constructing a comprehensive counterexplanation of the origins of the Book of Mormon, to replace the one taught by the prophets and accepted by generations of faithful Saints? Do the various authors even agree among themselves?

The reviewer of *Prologue to History* goes on to say that the book's author "too readily dismisses other scholars' arguments with remarks such as 'hardly convincing,' 'spurious,' 'rather strained,' 'confused,' 'flawed from the start,' 'argument becomes quite forced,' 'confuses the issue badly,' and 'a little desperate.' He does himself a disservice with this kind of strong pronouncement in the place of direct response."<sup>94</sup> Readers of the Metcalfe essays, too, will want to examine them carefully for this kind of thing. Certain authors are more prone to be dismissive than others, but some general questions apply to all. Do they, for instance, really confront the strongest arguments of those whose position they would refute? Or do they ignore the more persuasive arguments in order to focus on the weaker ones? Do they fairly and accurately state those arguments? Careful readers will want to note the use, in the essays under ex-

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<sup>91</sup> Friedman, "Late for a Very Important Date," 13.

<sup>92</sup> On the witnesses, see such books as Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem: Grandin, 1991); Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), recently reissued in paperback.

<sup>93</sup> Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: New American Library, 1980), 105. It is a measure of her incapacity to deal with the witnesses that Fawn Brodie employs Twain's shallow witticism in her cursory dismissal of their testimony. See Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 79.

<sup>94</sup> Friedman, "Late for a Very Important Date," 16.



amination, of logical "straw men" that distort the positions of those who might offer resistance to these "New Approaches." Brent Metcalfe's own concluding chapter in the book offers a particularly nice example: "Antagonists," he says, trying to claim the moderate middle ground for himself, "typically condemn [Joseph] Smith as a slavish plagiarist, while apologists exonerate him as an inspired marionette. . . . I accept neither of these reductionist portrayals."<sup>95</sup> Neither, of course, does any thinking Latter-day Saint.<sup>96</sup>

One of the purposes of the reviews gathered here is to help readers come to a decision about such questions. Readers need to decide whether the arguments presented in *New Approaches* oblige them to jettison belief in the Book of Mormon as a historical record, or even to surrender belief in God.

### A Fissure Runs Through It

The 1993–1994 Signature catalog, advertising Brent Metcalfe's book, features a statement from the Associated Press announcing that the contributors to *New Approaches* "consider the Book of Mormon scripture" although they doubt or deny its antiquity. This, however, is not entirely true. There is a fundamental disagreement among the writers of *New Approaches*: One of them isn't even a Latter-day Saint at all, having had his name removed from the records of the Church well over a decade ago, and he presumably feels himself in no way bound by the moral and theological teachings of the Book of Mormon.<sup>97</sup> But even among those whose names remain on the membership rolls, there is disagreement. While some of them affirm belief in God and in the "inspired" character of the Book of Mormon (Anthony Hutchinson and David P. Wright come immediately to mind), others, such as Brent Metcalfe himself, seem to deny not only the inspiration and authority of the book

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<sup>95</sup> Metcalfe, *New Approaches*, 434.

<sup>96</sup> See the comments of Stephen E. Robinson, in his review of Vogel, ed., *The Word of God*, 316–17, on that book's similar use of the technique.

<sup>97</sup> See Peterson, "Questions to Legal Answers," xxxix–xl.

but the very existence of God.<sup>98</sup> This is a fundamentally important issue. It is a chasm that is impossible to bridge.

I am inclined to think, while I strongly disagree with it, that the agnostics have taken the more consistent approach. And I have lots of company. Fundamentalist anti-Mormons, for example, seem to see the issue more clearly than many more sophisticated writers. Thus, the "Concerned Christians and Former Mormons" of Whittier, California, quite straightforwardly declare that, "If Joseph was the *author*, (*which we believe he was*), and he stated that he was the translator by divine authority . . . *he lied!*"<sup>99</sup> "By undermining the claim for the *Book of Mormon's* historicity," Bill McKeever observes of the contributors to *New Approaches*, "these writers reduce Joseph Smith to nothing more than a 19th century author of a fictional yarn. If there were no Nephites, there were no gold plates. If there were no gold plates, there was nothing for Smith to translate. . . . To conclude that the *Book of Mormon* is not an ancient record is to admit Joseph Smith was nothing less than a liar."<sup>100</sup>

But *New Approaches* never really deals with this issue. As an early, and generally favorable, review of the book noted, "several authors pay lip service to the intactness of Joseph Smith's prophetic vision," but they "studiously avoid . . . examining the hole left in a belief system by redefining a central spiritual event—for example, the Mormon belief in the resurrected Christ's visit to this continent—as only a metaphor."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> As described in Anderson, "Scholars Doubt Book of Mormon's Antiquity," Metcalfe implicitly compares writing on Mormonism to modern scholarly study of Greek mythology and ancient Egyptian religion.

<sup>99</sup> *Concerned Christians and Former Mormons Newsletter* (December 1993): 5; exotic emphasis and punctuation in the original. Compare *Concerned Christians and Former Mormons Newsletter* (August 1993): 1. Both items, by the way, unwittingly provide fascinating glimpses of the way fundamentalist Protestant anti-Mormons often fail to grasp, or even to read, the major arguments of those whose faith they assault.

<sup>100</sup> McKeever, "Questioning Joseph Smith's Role," 4. Compare Anderson, "Scholars Doubt Book of Mormon's Antiquity": "For [William Hamblin, as for other believing Mormon scholars who [*sic*] Metcalfe labels "apologists," Smith's prophetic mantle and The Book of Mormon's historical authenticity are inextricably linked. Metcalfe seems to agree, but draws the opposite conclusion."

<sup>101</sup> Paul Swenson, "Utah under Cover," *Salt Lake Tribune* (30 May 1993).

Why does it matter? The contemporary philosopher Robert M. Adams speaks usefully of what he terms a “nonnatural fact.” As he defines it, this is something “which does not consist simply in any fact or complex of facts which can be stated entirely in the languages of physics, chemistry, biology, and human psychology.”<sup>102</sup> (To which John Hick, another very prominent contemporary thinker, responds that “we should . . . add to the naturalistic languages that of sociology.”)<sup>103</sup> I would guess that most serious theistic thinkers are concerned to maintain the presence of “nonnatural facts” in explanations of religion and religious experience. And with good reason. If revelation and prophethood were reducible to purely naturalistic terms, with no residue remaining, they would seem to provide little if any reason to affirm the existence of God, let alone his active intervention—whether by incarnation, inspiration, or miracles—in the real world. This is, it seems to me, the major problem with a nineteenth-century fictional Book of Mormon.<sup>104</sup>

Yet the authors of the essays in *New Approaches* frequently use religious language, sometimes with obvious sincerity and sometimes without. But does it mean much? I think not. Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe’s public meditations about the relationship of the human and the divine in revelation, for instance, seem distinctly disingenuous in view of the fact that—although their published writings are silent on this question—at least one of them disbelieves in God.<sup>105</sup> And what, given this agnosticism, are we to make of their proposal of “prophetic eclecticism” as a model to make sense of Joseph Smith? This rather fuzzy concept “allows,” they say, “for the dynamic, inspired, or creative exchange between a prophet and his cultural environment.”

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<sup>102</sup> Robert M. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 105.

<sup>103</sup> John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 15.

<sup>104</sup> And, since the naturalizing authors of *New Approaches* take a parallel approach to the Bible, it is the major problem for fundamentalist anti-Mormons who would use Brent Metcalfe’s book as a weapon against Latter-day Saints. This sword has two edges. In order to so dismiss the Book of Mormon, they must admit the validity of a set of secular presuppositions, acceptance of which also necessarily undermines the authenticity of many events described in the Bible—most importantly of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ.

<sup>105</sup> See “Editor’s Introduction,” in Vogel, *The Word of God*, viii–ix; Vogel and Metcalfe, “Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Cosmology,” 187.

But if there is no God, if the material universe is a fully closed system where the environment is all there is, just what do Vogel and Metcalfe mean by “inspiration”? What is a “prophet” or a “charismatic seer” or “an imaginative prophetic author” or a “prophetic utterance” on such a nontheistic view?<sup>106</sup> Certainly, in Vogel and Metcalfe’s usage, these terms do not mean what they have meant for generations of faithful Latter-day Saints. (Though their new definitions are never explained.)<sup>107</sup> And what could an atheist or agnostic possibly mean by “a more honest faith” or by “fresh . . . spiritual vistas”?<sup>108</sup> A “myth”? “Something that was never true and always will be”? Professor Stephen E. Robinson commented on the same sort of thing when it appeared in an earlier Signature publication: “Several of the authors in *The Word of God*,” he wrote in 1991,

cannot seem to tolerate the suggestion that religious claims should be taken literally or objectively. . . . [Instead,] they insist that religious propositions cannot describe the empirical world, and invite the Latter-day Saints to move their propositions to some other world, the world of make believe, over the rainbow, never-never land, the realm of ideal forms. Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus—but not in the real, empirical world! Only as a set of propositions about an entirely separate and purely hypothetical reality, a fantasy land invented

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<sup>106</sup> Anderson, “Scholars Doubt Book of Mormon’s Antiquity,” quotes Metcalfe as saying, “You’re asking the wrong person if you want the answer to if [Smith’s] a prophet in the religious sense.” Indeed. For their use of such terms, see Vogel and Metcalfe, “Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Cosmology,” 211; Brent Lee Metcalfe, “The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis,” in Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches*, 434.

<sup>107</sup> That terminological slipperiness can play havoc with logical argument is amusingly illustrated by a hypothetical answer to the question, “Why are fire engines red?” “They have four wheels and eight men; four plus eight is twelve; twelve inches make a ruler; a ruler is Queen Elizabeth; Queen Elizabeth sails the seven seas; the seven seas have fish; the fish have fins; the Finns hate the Russians; the Russians are red; fire engines are always rushin’; so they’re red.” (D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984], 91; compare Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks, *Offenders for a Word: How Anti-Mormons Play Word Games to Attack the Latter-day Saints* [Salt Lake City: Aspen, 1992], 55–62.)

<sup>108</sup> Vogel and Metcalfe, “Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Cosmology,” 212; Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches*, ix.

by poets and dreamers, can religion be tolerated by empiricism and the naturalistic method.<sup>109</sup>

It appears that this is the "more mature belief" to which we are summoned. "The result in general," as E. Michael Jones puts it in a different but not unrelated context, "is the religious equivalent of inflation; there's lots of religious currency out there, but it isn't worth anything."<sup>110</sup> Those who accept this view will find their faith eloquently summarized in the words of poet Wallace Stevens: "We believe without belief, beyond belief." But the real meaning of this new religion will be little if anything more than the venerable religion of materialism: "The physical world is meaningless tonight / And there is no other."<sup>111</sup>

But if the religious language used by nontheists such as Metcalfe and Vogel carries only metaphorical, or sociological, import, how can the theistic writers in *New Approaches* make common cause with them? John Hick, one of the most prominent philosophers of religion in the English-speaking world, has some very important things to say about this issue. "The premiss [*sic*], either open or concealed, that lies behind the non-realist understandings of religion is," says Professor Hick, "the naturalistic conviction—or indeed faith—that the realm of material things and living organisms, including the human organism with its immensely complex brain, is the only realm there is; and that God exists only as an idea in the human mind/brain—in *mente* but not *in re*."<sup>112</sup> What are the implications of such a stance?

The cosmic optimism of the great world faiths depends upon a realist interpretation of their language. For it is only if this universe is the creation or expression of an ultimate overarching benign reality, and is such that the spiritual project of our existence continues in some form beyond this present life, that it is possible to expect a fulfilment that can justify the immense pain and travail

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<sup>109</sup> Robinson, review of Vogel, ed., *The Word of God*, 317.

<sup>110</sup> Jones, *Degenerate Moderns*, 125.

<sup>111</sup> Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1961), 336, 337.

<sup>112</sup> Hick, *Disputed Questions*, 7. "Premiss" is a legitimate alternative spelling of "premise." See Alex C. Michalos, *Principles of Logic* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 63.

of the journey. If, on the contrary, such notions as God, Brahman, Dharmakaya, rebirth, eternal life, are figments of our imaginations, we must face the grim fact that the marvellous human spiritual potential will only be fulfilled to the very fragmentary extent that it is in fact fulfilled in this world—none at all in some, a little in most of us, and a great deal in a very few. Thus a non-realist interpretation of religion inevitably entails a profound pessimism. From the point of view of a fortunate few it constitutes good news, but from the point of view of the human race as a whole it comes as profoundly bad news.<sup>113</sup>

It is, of course, thoroughly conceivable that the world might be utterly meaningless and indifferent, that it might offer neither comfort nor sympathy, neither hope nor permanence. It is logically possible that “our lives are but our marches to our graves.”<sup>114</sup> It is not beyond imagination that life is merely “a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more,” “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”<sup>115</sup> Wishing the cosmos were purposive and meaningful would not make it so. I do not think, however, that we are obligated by either logic or the available evidence to adopt such notions. (It was Macbeth’s guilt and his well-earned sense of inexorable, impending doom that evoked his bitter outburst on the emptiness of life.)<sup>116</sup> But even those who are inclined to do so should be aware of precisely what is at stake. And “people who tend to think that a vainglorious conversion to unoriginal heresy would be an indication of intelligence and good sense,” as al-Ghazālī called them,<sup>117</sup> need to know the intellectual destination to which their chosen path leads. Again, John Hick spells out clearly the consequences of accepting the irreligious world view:

The non-realist faith starts from and returns to the naturalistic conception that we are simply complex animals who live and die, the circumstances of our lives

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<sup>113</sup> Hick, *Disputed Questions*, 12–13.

<sup>114</sup> John Fletcher, *The Humorous Lieutenant* III.v.

<sup>115</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, act 5, scene 5, lines 24–28.

<sup>116</sup> Compare Moroni 10:22; also Mormon 2:13–14.

<sup>117</sup> Kamali, *Al-Ghazali's Tahafut al-Falasifah*, 3.

happening to be fortunate for some and unfortunate for others. Probably half or more of the children who have been born throughout human history and pre-history have died in infancy, their potentialities almost entirely undeveloped. Of those who have survived to adulthood, great numbers have lived under oppression or in slavery, or have experienced many other forms of suffering, including anxious fear of starvation or of slaughter by enemies. And amidst these harsh pressures the human potential, of which we glimpse aspects in the saints, artists, thinkers and creative leaders, has only been able to make a very small beginning towards its fulfillment in the majority of human lives. If the naturalistic vision is correct, that potentiality can never be fulfilled in the great majority, for at death they have ceased to exist. And it would be Utopian to expect that our situation on this earth is about to become radically different. Thus the non-realist forms of religion, presupposing this naturalistic interpretation of the human situation, abandon hope for humankind as a whole.<sup>118</sup>

To put it mildly, this is not a very cheering prospect. What comfort does it give to the parents of a dying child? None. What good word does it speak to someone trapped in incurable, debilitating disease? Again, none. How can it hearten us in the face of the fact that the wicked and the tyrannical often prosper, while the humble and good often fall victims to oppression and injustice? It can't. "Without religion, which implies a continuous future, who can escape the grim knowledge that human existence is birth, life and loss, death and oblivion?"<sup>119</sup> Nobody. And draping this depressing picture in religious metaphors helps nothing. At least Bertrand Russell faced the implications of his atheism without sentimentality:

That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his

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<sup>118</sup> Hick, *Disputed Questions*, 13.

<sup>119</sup> Joseph Epstein, "C. P. Cavafy, a Poet in History," *The New Criterion* 12/5 (January 1994): 21. Epstein contends that "Homosexuals, having no children, who are the key agency of futurity, get this sad news first."

beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy that rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.<sup>120</sup>

Russell was, I am convinced, far too confident in his hopelessness. There are rational reasons for belief that the universe is meaningful, that life is good and purposeful. Those reasons include the religious experiences of humankind, within and without The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (I number among these the stories of scripture.) If such experiences are accorded the status of "nonnatural facts," if they are not reduced to socioeconomic adjustments, abnormal psychology, and the biochemistry of the brain, they provide grounds for religious faith. And religious faith, as William James famously put it, "says that the best things are the most eternal things, . . . the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word."<sup>121</sup>

I would feel much better about *New Approaches* if it had recognized the huge gulf separating theists from atheists. The stakes are very high here. It will not do to claim, as the 1993–1994 Signature catalog does, that critics of the company's dominant ideology are simply "antagonistic . . . toward new ideas."<sup>122</sup> I would feel better if the theistic authors in the book

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<sup>120</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1918), 47–48.

<sup>121</sup> James, *Pragmatism and Other Essays*, 210; compare Hick, *Disputed Questions*, 13. The quotation, again, is from "The Will to Believe."

<sup>122</sup> Compare the strikingly similar response of certain leftist academics to their critics, as described in Parks, review of Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, 94.



had not trained all their fire on their fellow-theists in the Latter-day Saint community, thereby helping to further the projects of others who are hostile to their own most important beliefs. I would have felt better about their participation in the book if they had devoted at least some little attention to the question of why or how, given their view of the origins of the Book of Mormon, we can still believe that it somehow manifests or attests to the divine. I do not think, frankly, that they can make the case. But I am struck by their singular failure even to try.