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Gary F. Novak

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Title Examining the Environmental Explanation of the Book of Mormon

Author(s) Gary F. Novak

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Abstract *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism* (1992), by Robert N. Hullinger.

Robert N. Hullinger. *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992. xvii + 227 pp., with two appendixes, scriptural and subject indexes. \$18.95, paperback.

Examining the Environmental Explanation of the Book of Mormon

Reviewed by Gary F. Novak

Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism was first published in 1980 under the title *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon*.¹ The differences between the two editions are striking. The chapter titles differ,² photographs

¹ Robert N. Hullinger, *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St. Louis, MO: Clayton, 1980). Citations to the Signature edition will be parenthetical within the text.

² The following table illustrates the sometimes noteworthy differences between 1980 and 1992:

1980	1992
Chapter 1: Smith's Goals for the Book of Mormon	The Purpose of the Book of Mormon
Chapter 2: Joseph Smith: Translator or Author?	Translator or Author
Part II: The Occasion for a Defense	Part II. A Defense Needed
Chapter 3: The Setting: New England and New York	New England and Western New York
Chapter 4: The Stage: New England and Western New York	The Palmyra Region
Part III: The Sources of the Defense	Part III: Sources for the Defense
Chapter 5: Lost: The Indians' Book of God	The Indian's Lost Book of God

and illustrations have been changed, omitted, or placed in a different order; and a foreword by notorious anti-Mormon Wesley P. Walters has been excised. In the 1980 edition, each chapter contains sections which are separated by titles set in boldface. The sections include revealing titles such as "Smith as Author," "Smith's Dry Spells," "The Only Good Indians Are Dead," "Ethan Smith: Restoration Discovered," and "Joseph Smith: Restoration Transformed."³ In addition, some chapters in the 1980 edition contain a "Summary" section.

In the 1992 edition, some endnotes have been changed or added. It may be tempting to claim that the changes to the endnotes are simply an effort to inform the reader of the relevant literature since 1980. But such a claim would seem misleading. Of the relevant literature published since 1980, Hullinger cites only that material which has been published by Signature Books. The list includes Dan Vogel's *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon: Religious Solutions from Columbus to Joseph Smith*, Vogel's *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism*, Scott H. Faulring's *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, and D. Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*. Vogel's and Quinn's works clearly support Hullinger's environmental explanation of the Book of Mormon. What is surprising is that Hullinger seems unaware of literature that bears directly on his work, published since 1980, including Richard Bushman's important *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*⁴ and Dean Jessee's *Papers of Joseph*

Chapter 6: Identified: Ezekiel's Two Books	Ezekiel's Two Books
Chapter 7: Recovered: Isaiah's Book, Buried and Sealed	Isaiah, Buried and Sealed
Chapter 8: Exposed: Masonic Ritual and Lore	Masonic Ritual and Lore

The discriminating reader will notice the way in which anti-Mormon rhetoric has been toned down for the Signature edition.

³ This is only a small sample.

⁴ Although Hullinger's reluctance to cite Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 219, is perhaps understandable since Bushman directly contradicts his thesis, Bushman does cite Hullinger. Indeed Bushman's *Joseph Smith and*

Smith. None of the relevant materials published by FARMS are acknowledged.

Hullinger offers what has come to be called a naturalistic, or environmental, explanation of the Book of Mormon. He does not, therefore, "believe that the Book of Mormon is a historical narrative of ancient Americans during the period from 600 B.C. to 400 A.D." (p. xv). It is, rather, "a product of the early nineteenth century and was written by Joseph Smith" (p. xv). Hullinger does not attempt to weigh the evidence for or against the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon, although much of the book is an argument against the possibility of its being authentic. He believes that by firmly placing the Book of Mormon in its nineteenth-century "context" he can establish that Joseph "had the ability, the motive, and the opportunity to write a brief in defense of God" (p. 14).

The 1980 "Foreword" by Wesley P. Walters is especially revealing. It begins:

Any attempt to describe Joseph Smith as a defender of God will strike many as strange, especially when they remember some of his activities. They may think it strange, indeed, that Smith could be motivated by the noble desire to defend revealed religion.

From both a biblical and psychological viewpoint, however, no one is perfectly motivated, and everyone is more or less inconsistent. It is quite conceivable, therefore, that Joseph Smith could engage in questionable activities and try to defend revealed religion during the same time period.⁵

Although Walters finds some reasons not to "accept Mr. Hullinger's main argument," he still finds "this work of great value"⁶ because Hullinger "provides still further evidence that the Book of Mormon is a wholly [sic] modern production, not a

Skepticism (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1974) is relevant to the title of Hullinger's book, if not its content. *Joseph Smith and Skepticism* is not cited at all.

⁵ Hullinger, *Mormon Answer to Skepticism*, xi.

⁶ *Ibid.*

translation of some ancient, long-buried record.”⁷ Walters does not indicate exactly what he thinks that evidence is, although he is confident that much of it is available for the first time. Hullinger is careful to indicate his “special gratitude” to Wesley P. Walters since “his standard of scholarship and detail set a goal toward which [Hullinger] strained in completing this study” (p. x). Those familiar with anti-Mormon literature generally, and with the work of Wesley P. Walters in particular, will find this statement especially revealing. For them, much of the book will be predictable, following a well-established route.

A Note on Method

According to Hullinger, he preferred “to put the best construction on Joseph Smith, let his expressed motives speak for themselves, then draw conclusions from the evidence” (p. ix). It is unclear how motives “speak for themselves” since all Hullinger has before him is a text or text analogue. At worst, the motives Hullinger attributes to Joseph Smith may reflect Hullinger’s own hopes, wishes, and assumptions. At best, he may accurately represent Joseph Smith’s own “motives.” In any case, naive versions of “letting the evidence speak for itself,” or in Hullinger’s case “letting the motives speak for themselves”—a much more difficult task—have been largely discredited.⁸ Hullinger grants that his “approach may not always rule out a negative opinion of Joseph Smith, but it allows for a more charitable estimate of his intentions” (p. ix). If we cannot expect accuracy, we can at least expect charity.

Joseph’s intentions are not unimportant for Hullinger’s argument. Without making assumptions about Joseph’s intentions

⁷ Ibid., xii.

⁸ See Louis Midgley, “The Challenge of Historical Consciousness: Mormon History and the Encounter with Secular Modernity,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:502–51; David E. Bohn, “Unfounded Claims and Impossible Expectations: A Critique of the New Mormon History” in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 227–61. See especially the notes for both these items. Obviously, the list of relevant literature would exceed the limits of a footnote.

and especially his motivations, Hullinger would not have a hypothesis from which to work. This may be true of any historical interpretation, but the objective of getting at the motives or intentions of Joseph Smith is complicated at best, especially when considering the Book of Mormon.

This complexity can be illustrated by observing that Hullinger does not explain how we are to understand the different, differing, and conflicting speeches in the Book of Mormon: the teachings of Nephi, Benjamin, Alma, Mormon, and Moroni stand in stark opposition to Sherem, Zeezrom, and Korihor. Even the teachings of the Sherems, Zeezroms, and Korihors of the book exhibit subtle differences. The length of a speech, or the frequency of a certain kind of speech, cannot be understood to represent the authentic teaching of the author of a complicated and complex text.

If one assumes, as Hullinger does, that Joseph's teaching and opinions are contained in the speeches of his reputable characters, Hullinger is still faced with the task of understanding those speeches in context. That context is contained within the Book of Mormon itself and not, as Hullinger assumes, in whatever similarities or parallels, real or imagined, that he thinks he has found in Joseph's environment. If one grants that the Book of Mormon exhibits a complex plan—and it is increasingly difficult to claim that it is simply a hodgepodge of Joseph's ramblings—one must also account for the arrangement of the various speeches, the changing setting in which they are presented, the character of the people to whom they are attributed, and the audience to whom they are addressed. Hullinger's way of reading the Book of Mormon is remarkably simple, or simplistic, given the task he has set for himself.

Reading the Book of Mormon

Since the purpose of the Book of Mormon, according to Hullinger, is to "offer support for Christian claims for the Bible, for Jesus Christ, and for God" (p. 2) against the ravages of skepticism, and since "the book's goals are elaborated through its plot and character development" (p. 1), an examination of how Hullinger interprets the Book of Mormon is in order. Since his intention is to explain the purpose of the Book of Mormon, I will

begin by examining a single page in the chapter, "The Purpose of the Book of Mormon." On page 3 Hullinger cites the Book of Mormon no less than fourteen times.

The first scripture cited on page 3 is Doctrine and Covenants 3:20. Hullinger uses it to support his assertion that the Book of Mormon "would inform the Indians of God's promises" (pp. 2-3). Does Doctrine and Covenants 3:20 actually say anything of God's promises to the Indians? While it does mention the Lamanites, the scripture says nothing of Indians. But Hullinger is not wholly unaware of the problem of identifying Indians with Lamanites. According to the footnote the "term 'Indian' does not occur in the Book of Mormon, but it is synonymous with 'Lamanite'" (p. 6). Hullinger's apparent reasoning for identifying Indians with Lamanites is that "surviving Lamanites [after the final destruction of the Nephites] were cursed with a dark skin because of their unbelief and became the ancestors of native Americans" (p. 6). Hullinger's assertions are complicated by the Book of Mormon itself, which indicates that at the time after the appearance of Jesus there "were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites" (4 Nephi 1:17). Of course the "skin of blackness" had come upon the Lamanites many hundreds of years before. When the "great division" came among the people, those "who rejected the gospel were called Lamanites, and Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites" (4 Nephi 1:38). The Book of Mormon makes the "great division" appear to be a matter of factionalism rather than one of merely hereditary or genetic links. There is no easy identification, within the Book of Mormon itself, of Lamanites with Indians. This may be a fine distinction, and not precisely central to Hullinger's thesis, but it is nonetheless an assumption that permeates his work in a subtle way and actually makes a difference for how one understands the Book of Mormon.

According to Hullinger, the "Book of Mormon would lead [the Indians] to end their hatred of others, to befriend each other, and to stop their contentions" (p. 3). His support for this is Alma 26:9:

For if we had not come up out of the land of Zarahemla, these our dearly beloved brethren, who have so dearly beloved us, would still have been racked with

hatred against us, yea, and they would also have been strangers to God.

This scripture is part of Ammon's reflections on his missionary efforts among the Lamanites. Of course, it makes exactly no promises concerning Indians or of ending "their hatred of others" and it does not support Hullinger's assertion at all. But it does indicate that, typically, people do not hate those who have converted them to the gospel. Something entirely different, love, is the result. Undoubtedly this would be as true for Hullinger's "Indians" as for anyone else.

Hullinger goes on to explain that if the Jews accept the Book of Mormon as "a witness that the man they killed was Christ and God," "then God would restore them to their own land; for unbelief has kept them dispersed" (p. 3). One of the citations in support of this is 2 Nephi 15:15-18:

And the mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled.

But the Lord of Hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness.

Then shall the lambs feed after their manner, and the waste places of the fat ones shall strangers eat.

Wo unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope.

The scripture in question is a direct, unmodified quotation from Isaiah 5:15-18. I am at a loss to understand how this supports Hullinger's assertion.

This material represents only a fraction of the bad reasoning and sloppy reading that one can find in *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism*. He goes on to claim that "American Indians were a segment broken off from [the] ten tribes." Reading the Book of Mormon more carefully would have corrected this opinion since there appear to be, at a minimum, remnants of Joseph and Judah. Indeed the Book of Mormon begins in Jerusalem at least one hundred years after the ten tribes had been conquered and carried away.

Examining the Story

Hullinger is not satisfied to report the contents of the Book of Mormon, as he understands them. The point of the book is not to illustrate how Joseph fashioned his defense of God against Skepticism, but rather to provide a rationale for Joseph's production of the Book of Mormon and thereby show that the truth claims of Mormonism—for clearly the Restored Gospel stands or falls with the truth claims of the Book of Mormon—are simply false. In order to construct his environmental explanation, and at the same time undercut the traditional story of the Book of Mormon and the foundation of the Church, Hullinger examines Joseph's immediate environment, the Harris-Anthon affair, the use of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, Masonry, and Joseph's ideas about revelation.

Those who provide environmental explanations of the Book of Mormon sometimes disagree among themselves concerning matters of detail and even, on occasion, the large picture. One can therefore confidently expect Hullinger's explanation of the Book of Mormon, his explanation of its manner of production, and his understanding of Joseph's "motives" to contrast with at least some of the more recent thought on the matter. Hullinger himself is apparently aware of at least some of these differences.⁹

Hullinger's story of Joseph Smith can be contrasted with other recent environmental, or naturalistic, accounts. Hullinger's account seems to indicate that Joseph knew he was responding to Skepticism and that Joseph's response was both reasoned and calculated. Marvin Hill, for example, would agree with Hullinger that much of the Book of Mormon displays elements of its environment, especially Arminianism, with vestiges of Calvinism.¹⁰ How-

⁹ In commenting on George B. Arbaugh's *Revelation in Mormonism: Its Character and Changing Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932), Hullinger notes that his own "conclusions would call into question [Arbaugh's] central thesis about the Book of Mormon" (p. ix). He also credits Fawn Brodie for demolishing the Spalding theory, Marvin S. Hill for correcting Brodie's neglect of Joseph's "religious motivations," Jan Shipps for attempting to get past "saint or fraud" dichotomies, and Mario DePillis for recognizing Joseph's quest for "religious authority" (p. xiv). Hullinger also occasionally notes his disagreements with these "historians."

¹⁰ Marvin S. Hill, "The Shaping of the Mormon Mind in New England and

ever, Hill holds that Joseph, like other early Mormons, could think that his dreams "had cosmic significance" because he lacked "the benefits of Sigmund Freud's analysis of dreams."¹¹ While this seemingly accounts for Joseph's visions, Hill faults Fawn M. Brodie for thinking Joseph was a conscious deceiver because it is unlikely that Joseph "would have equated these terms [vision and dream] so frankly in his manuscript and in the Book of Mormon. That Joseph believed that his dreams or mental images were visions, that he also believed that what he felt intuitively was the voice of the Lord speaking within, was not inconsistent with his background and with the time and place in which he lived."¹² Joseph can be excused from the charge of being a conscious deceiver because he did not know that his "visions came during periods of great stress and offered surcease from troublesome doubts."¹³ Hullinger's naturalistic account conflicts with Hill's to the degree that Hullinger holds that Joseph knew exactly what he was doing, however noble his intentions to save Christianity from the ravages of Deism.

Others have suggested that revelation, that is, Mormon "mystical experience," can be explained by not merely the cultural forces causing stress and individual crisis, but also by identity crises and mysticism.¹⁴ According to Thomas G. Alexander, the

New York," *BYU Studies* 9/3 (Spring 1969): 351-72. According to Hill, *ibid.*, 364, he agrees with "Thomas F. O'Dea that the general tone of the Book of Mormon is Arminian but believe[s] he fails to note remnants of Calvinism that remain." According to Hullinger, "The triumph of Arminianism in Smith's thought made of sin an enabling force, freeing men and women to discover and make of themselves gods" (p. 174). Hullinger also sees "the early Unitarian view in treating the Trinity, that 'Christ was the God, the Father of all things' " (p. 156).

¹¹ Marvin S. Hill, "Brodie Revisited: A Reappraisal" *Dialogue* 7/4 (Winter 1972): 80.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Thomas G. Alexander, "Wilford Woodruff and the Changing Nature of Mormon Religious Experience," *Church History* 45/1 (March 1976): 56-69; Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 3-43. Alexander, "Wilford Woodruff," 61, is careful to note that his analysis is meant merely to "serve as a model for understanding" Mormonism as a whole. In order to make his argument appeal to as wide an audience as possible, Alexander introduced

very earliest Mormon mystical experiences, including “the opening of the heavens, the visitation of angels, and seeing Jesus Christ sitting on the right hand of the Father,” later became more “subdued”—that is, became inspiration—as forces in the surrounding culture changed and persecution abated.¹⁵ Wilford Woodruff “passed through two important changes in the basic meaning of religious experience.”¹⁶ Sometime during the Nauvoo period “the basic nature of mystical experience changed from open supernatural experiences to personal revelation, dreams, inspiration, and to insights connected with missionary work, church ritual, healings, and the dealings of God with man.”¹⁷ Thus Alexander suggests that the same “social, cultural, and economic conditions associated with modernization which spawned Woodruff’s search for Christian primitivism also fathered Marxism.”¹⁸ Both Marxism and the Restored Gospel can be seen as a response to the same cultural conditions. Others have suggested that Joseph’s revelations can be explained as a “will to prophesy” which involves “the reaction of a few brilliant conflicted persons to the unbridgeable contradictions of life.”¹⁹

“mysticism” as an explanation of the early revelations of the Saints. Mysticism is, of course, foreign to the Saints’ self-understanding and, as commonly understood, distinct from revelation. Explaining what he means by mysticism, Alexander, *ibid.*, distinguished between “affirmative mysticism” in which the “mystic, prophet, or revelator could learn of God’s will through spiritual experiences, then pass it on through the written word or by word of mouth to those of the faith who were prepared to accept it.” He thus contrasts “affirmative mysticism” with the more traditional negative mysticism in which “knowledge and mystical insight were personal and often ineffable” and which revealed nothing of God or his will. Thus, Alexander, *ibid.*, could claim that “Joseph Smith insisted on the importance of mystical knowledge through direct inspiration in Mormon religious experience. Joseph Smith’s religious life can be interpreted as a series of mystical experiences and the Book of Mormon (Moroni 10:5) promises all persons a confirmation of the Spirit as a means of knowing ‘the truth of all things.’ ”

¹⁵ Alexander, “Wilford Woodruff,” 62 and 64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁹ Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 17.

Joseph "can be viewed as finding his capacity for prophethood in a series of contradictions" and conflicts.²⁰

Hullinger's Joseph Smith is more calculating and more reasoned, if not reasonable, than this sampling of opinion would hold. Indeed, Hullinger does not provide an explanation of revelation: revelation is simply a means to Joseph's ends. Joseph invented revelations when it suited his purposes in discrediting or responding to Skepticism. Those revelations were necessary to counter the charge that revelation had ceased with the apostles and hence that God was changeable. Hullinger's Joseph regains that ground against Skepticism and Deism and, at least in this regard, differs from some other environmental explanations. If Hullinger's Joseph is responding to cultural and environmental forces by producing the Book of Mormon and reporting other revelations, at least he is not the victim of or victimized by those forces.

Most of Hullinger's story follows familiar ground. The Book of Mormon contains a response to and condemnation of Masonry, while borrowing from it as "a truly ancient form confirming God's relationships with humans from Adam on" (p. 111); it confirms popular legends about the lost ten tribes and the origin of the Indians (p. 60); it adopts "the Unitarian point of view of Christ" (p. 123); it affirms a traditional view of prophecy against the deists (p. 144). Of course, Joseph borrowed from Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*. Hullinger notes that "dependence cannot be dismissed because of what Joseph Smith did *not* use from the *View of the Hebrews*, or because he altered the features of resemblance between the two books, or because he contradicted some features of the earlier work" (p. 185). This is to say that he will not allow anything to count against the Ethan Smith theory. "One need only show that the ideas of the Book of Mormon were in reach of Joseph Smith" (p. 185). And, according to Hullinger, it does not matter if Joseph actually used or read *View of the Hebrews*, since given "the wide availability of [other] sources, it is difficult denying their possible influence on Joseph Smith" (p. 186).²¹ This sampling represents, of course, a more or less

²⁰ Ibid., 18.

²¹ How large was the library to which Joseph had access and how did he manage to spend so much time burning the midnight oil while his family was desperately poor? I occasionally joke to friends that I intend to write a book

conventional environmental explanation of the Book of Mormon. In this, Hullinger differs very little from those who have preceded him. If he can be seen poisoning the wells against any possible refutation of the Ethan Smith theory, he can be excused since this is simply the standard anti-Mormon response to the Book of Mormon.²²

Hullinger complains that "the Book of Mormon is vague about details of ancient American geography and antiquities, enough so that no area can be specifically pinpointed on a map" (p. 185). He is apparently unaware of John L. Sorenson's *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* in which Sorenson details every major Book of Mormon site and in most instances provides a known Mesoamerican location.²³ Sorenson and others have continued research on the so-called limited geography model of the Book of Mormon. But limitations in Hullinger's research base are not uncommon.

Why Review This Book?

Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism is not, despite Wesley Walters's claims, breaking new ground or providing new material against the Book of Mormon. Why bother reviewing a book that can best be described as less than consuming reading?

According to David P. Wright, in another Signature publication, *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism* is one of several studies "making it clear that these works [the Book of Mormon

titled, *Joseph Smith's Lost Years in the British Museum*, since that would seem to be the most likely location for all the obscure books he would need in order to fabricate the Book of Mormon. I am not the only one to notice this odd feature of the environmental explanation. See John A. Tvedtnes, review of Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Answering Mormon Scholars: A Response to Criticism of the Book "Covering up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon"* in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/2 (1994): 209 n. 7.

²² A concise evaluation of the Ethan Smith theory can be found in "View of the Hebrews: 'An Unparallel,'" in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 83-87.

²³ John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985). See also his "Viva Zapato! Hurray for the Shoe!" *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 297-361, which also includes more items in the notes.

and the book of Abraham] are not ancient."²⁴ Wright indicates that he believes "these studies are on the right track" and his essay is intended to "add to the evidence for this view."²⁵ But Wright's reading of the Book of Mormon is much more careful, if not more considered and coherent, than Hullinger's; Wright's argument is more sophisticated by several magnitudes. It is difficult to imagine that Hullinger's more traditional anti-Mormon argument against the authenticity of the Book of Mormon would provide support for the kind of textual analysis performed by Wright, except to the degree that Wright, like Hullinger, sees the Book of Mormon as some variety of frontier fiction.²⁶

²⁴ David P. Wright, "'In Plain Terms That We May Understand': Joseph Smith's Transformation of Hebrews in Alma 12-13," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 165.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

²⁶ A large percentage of the books and essays Wright cites in support of his position have been published or republished by Signature Books. And they all certainly fit the ideology currently being advanced by Signature. On the question of what may be described as the Signature agenda, see Louis C. Midgley, "More Revisionist Legerdemain and the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 305-11; Daniel C. Peterson, "Questions to Legal Answers," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): xlvii-liv.

However, many of the items are of questionable quality and at least one of the authors does not understand himself as attacking the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. William D. Russell's "Historicity and the Mormon Scriptures," *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1983): 53-63, represents little more than Russell's personal odyssey of unbelief and contains more than its share of faulty reasoning and insufficient statistical samples. Russell's best argument in "A Further Inquiry into the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone* 7 (September-October 1982): 20-27, attacks the Book of Mormon on the basis of its apparent inability to square with certain modern assumptions about the composition of the Bible. Russell's argument has been thoroughly examined, if not dismantled, by A. Don Sorensen, "Russell against the Book of Mormon: The Problem of the Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi," in a paper delivered at the Mormon History Association annual meeting, Provo, Utah, 11 May 1984. Marvin Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), does not understand his own argument concerning the nineteenth-century environmental influences on the Book of Mormon as undermining its historical authenticity. According to Hill,

That the Book of Mormon addresses some theological and other issues discussed in America in 1830, as Grant Underwood, among others, has argued, seems evident. But Brodiean conclusions are not in

Issues of the influence of *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism* aside, it is not difficult to imagine an argument against the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon that attempts to separate what is understood as the ethical or moral teaching of the book from the historical content. It would not matter, our imagined critic would say, whether or not there was a real Lehi colony, or whether there were real "empirical" gold plates, or whether Joseph Smith really talked to an angel named Moroni. The moral teaching of the book would remain just as true, even if Joseph Smith's story were completely false or even an out-and-out lie. That teaching would surely include words from the Savior's sermon at the temple, even though Christ never really said those words, and we would be able to salvage truths about unconditional love. (And we could, at the frontiers of theology, discuss the limitations of such love and perhaps even speculate that putting any qualifying word in front of the word *love*, like *total*, *Christ-like*, and perhaps even *unconditional*, no longer makes that love genuinely *unconditional*.) Of course, at this point we would no longer need worry about a restored Church of Jesus Christ, since, obviously, no restoration could have happened if Joseph did not have real plates and did not talk to heavenly messengers. And we could eliminate the need for any priesthood or temple ordinances since it hardly makes sense to talk about the gospel being restored while claiming that the Book of Mormon is not an authentic ancient record. We could salvage some kind of community based

order here. For one thing it could be argued that the text is prophetic and Blake Ostler has suggested that there might be elements of both ancient and 1830 American culture in it. But I would not exclude the possibility also that one finds what he knows in the text—that an Americanist will find Americanisms and Egyptologist Egyptian elements, and so on. As Hugh Nibley has argued, it is very difficult to claim finality in such matters. I meant what I said when I criticized Brodie for assuming she had final answers when other explanations might be possible.

Marvin S. Hill, "Afterword," *BYU Studies* 30/4 (Fall 1990): 122. In spite of this argument, Hill detests relativizing the past and prefers a method that allows historians to "recover it in an objective way." Marvin S. Hill, "The 'New Mormon History' Reassessed in Light of Recent Books on Joseph Smith and Mormon Origins," *Dialogue* 21/3 (Autumn 1988): 125. I would assume that Hill would want his remarks read in that light.

on the moral teaching of the Book of Mormon, but we could very well find that the teaching is open to various conflicting interpretations because no prophecy or inspiration is available to guide our efforts to interpret that teaching. We could then discard whatever portions of that teaching that we found unsavory or which conflicted with our efforts to seek pleasures of one kind or another, or which offended our sense of the "politically correct." So it may turn out that the Book of Mormon could not provide the basis for that kind of community and may also prove to be its destruction; or at least the contention caused by various conflicting interpretations of the moral teaching would prove disastrous.

So it turns out that the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon is in an intricate way linked to the restored gospel and to the faith and memory of the Saints. The book is both the foundation and the mortar of that community. Books like *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism* remind us of the relationship of the Book of Mormon to the community of the Saints and, in a negative way, make it more difficult to accept various and conflicting interpretations of how Joseph may have, knowingly or unknowingly, fabricated the Book of Mormon. Joseph's own story of how he received and translated the Book of Mormon remains the most coherent and sensible explanation.

Finally, an environmental explanation of environmental explanations of the Book of Mormon: It is by now clear that environmental explanations of the Book of Mormon follow a more or less clearly marked path. Most agree that Joseph worked elements of his own environment into the Book of Mormon, including popular stories linking the lost ten tribes to the Indians, anti-Masonry sentiment, and Calvinism combined with Arminianism, with elements of Universalism thrown in. Many also agree that he had access to Ethan Smith and other popular writers of the day. Some go so far as to include psychological explanations, including Freudian interpretations of dreams, but also other elements of dysfunction or dissociation. All of these explanations of Joseph Smith are simply part of the historian's culture, and are talked about at the Sunstone Symposium, at the Mormon History Association, at late night gatherings in hotel rooms during these conferences, over the table at lunch, in the hall between sessions and classes and, most recently, on the Internet. One cannot study

Joseph Smith for very long without encountering them. And since historians live in a stress-filled environment in which they must "publish or perish," we can hardly expect them to resist the temptation to use what they find in their culture and publish environmental explanations of Joseph Smith. Those explanations are, so to speak, "in the air." To resist that temptation would be to say that the historian is not a mere product of his times (but such a claim is clearly false since he obviously lives in our time). If some find themselves objecting to my environmental explanation of their environmental explanations, the answer to the question Why? may prove enlightening for our understanding of Joseph Smith's story as well.