Editor's Introduction: Triptych (Inspired by Heironymus Bosch)

Daniel C. Peterson
Introduction to the current issue, including editor’s picks. Peterson discusses the status of Christian churches in 1820, an offer to debate Ed Decker, the quest for the historical Jesus through the Jesus Seminar and the implications of that type of scholarship on Mormonism: “Agnostic or radically revisionist critics of the restored Gospel, and fundamentalist Protestant anti-Mormons, tend to converge, united despite their other differences by their disbelief in the founding narratives and sacred scriptures of the Restoration.”
Editor's Introduction
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Daniel C. Peterson

With this issue of the Review, we modify its title but continue our numbering of volumes. The name Review of Books on the Book of Mormon, we found, defined too narrowly what we wanted to cover. Although the attention of the FARMS Review of Books will presumably remain overwhelmingly directed to books about the Book of Mormon, there are other topics relevant to the interests and training of those affiliated with FARMS (e.g., temples, the book of Abraham, formative events in early Latter-day Saint history, anti-Mormon assaults on Latter-day Saint belief, perhaps even some books that do not deal directly with Mormonism at all) that we will now be able to cover without feeling that we are sneaking them into a periodical to which, by titular definition, they do not really belong. We have also taken the opportunity to alter the manner in which we structure the contents of the Review. No longer will reviews appear in simple alphabetical order. In a bid to make our efforts more user-friendly, we shall arrange them by subject (though such categorization will never be an exact science), and only thereafter by the name of the reviewed item's author.

One thing I can promise. As long as I remain editor, the “Editor’s Introduction” will continue to be a place where I offer my observations on passing phenomena germane to Mormonism to an audience that, by and large, probably wishes I would keep them to myself. But hey, the opportunity to spout off as the mood strikes me is one of the few compensations I receive for editing this thing.

Herewith, accordingly, comments on a trio of loosely related topics:
I. "What about Bob?"

Straw person fallacy: Restating another’s argument in such a manner as to weaken the original and proceeding to criticize the weakened version (the straw person), hoping that others will think that the weakened version is the argument of your opponent.

John D. Mullen

Professor Stephen Ricks and I published a volume in 1992 entitled Offenders for a Word: How Anti-Mormons Play Word Games to Attack the Latter-day Saints. At one point in that book, we had occasion to examine an amusing argument from the inimitable Robert McKay, of Oklahoma’s ever-entertaining Utah Missions, Inc. The passage runs as follows:

Nor has Robert McKay given us any reason to accept his cute syllogism, offered as a demonstration of alleged Latter-day Saint inconsistency on this issue: “1. Christian churches are false. 2. But Mormonism is Christian. 3. Therefore Mormonism is false.”

What the Lord told Joseph Smith in the grove was that the churches and creeds of 1820 were defective and distorted by error. He did not say that they were entirely and utterly wrong (since they preserved much truth), nor did he say that each and every Christian church would always be wrong. Nor did he include the as-yet-unorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in his judgment. He did not say that Christianity, as such, is false. There is nothing logically wrong with saying that the churches of 1820 were incorrect on

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1 John D. Mullen, Hard Thinking: The Reintroduction of Logic to Everyday Life (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 143. Mullen’s “straw person fallacy” is, of course, simply a politically correct version of the venerable “straw man fallacy.”


many important issues ("corrupt"), and then saying that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (organized in 1830) is true.4

The point, of course, is merely that a divine declaration on the state of affairs in 1820 cannot be used without caution to define the state of affairs in 1830 and beyond. That the churches and creeds available before the restoration of the gospel were inadequate cannot seriously be construed to bar God from establishing a Church thereafter with which he could be "well pleased" (D&C 1:30). No contradiction arises if God is relatively displeased with the situation in 1820, and relatively satisfied in 1830. One could obviously go even further: The Lord’s statement to Joseph Smith did not say that the churches he was criticizing were to be condemned because they were Christian. Their shortcomings resided in other aspects. Thus the mere fact that the restored Church is Christian too does not implicate it in God’s judgment; only participation in those churches’ faults would do so.

Perhaps an analogous (but manifestly incorrect) argument will illustrate what I mean: The great astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus looked at previous theories of the solar system, almost all of them variations of the Ptolemaic approach, and, deciding that they were wrong, proposed his own. Subsequently, his heliocentric or sun-centered conception of the solar system, with modifications by Johannes Kepler and others, has swept all rivals from the field. But let us imagine an astronomical equivalent of Robert McKay, who refuses to accept the idea that the earth revolves around the sun. He searches desperately for something with which to discredit Copernicus, but has a very difficult time because, frankly, the evidence is all against him. Then, one day, he realizes that Copernicus’s position is self-contradictory! Triumphantly, he trots out a positively lethal anti-Copernican syllogism: “1. Theories of the solar system are false. 2. But Copernicus’s theory is a theory of the solar system. 3. Therefore Copernicus’s theory is false.” The world is stunned. Mortified scientists hang their heads in humiliation. Modern astronomy crashes to the ground in ruins, and subsequent investigations reveal that Neil Armstrong’s fraudulent

4 Peterson and Ricks, Offenders for a Word, 170–71.
walk on the moon was indeed filmed on a NASA sound stage, just as the Flat Earth Society had long maintained.

What is wrong with this? Obviously, the problem lies in the translation of Copernicus's actual opinion into the first premise of the argument. Copernicus certainly did not think that all theories of the solar system were and ever would be false simply because they were theories of the solar system, any more than Joseph Smith thought that all Christian churches were and ever would be false simply by virtue of their being Christian. Otherwise, it would have been as foolish and self-contradictory for Copernicus to propound a new account of the solar system as it was, according to Robert McKay, for Joseph Smith to found a new church.

I had thought that my argument was fairly clear. (I leave it to the reader to determine whether Mr. McKay's misreading—one might call his style of reasoning "virtual rationality," a crude faked imitation of logic—is the product of dishonesty or incompetence.) Subsequent experience, though, has convinced me that I was naive. Picking up a 1994 book entitled Questions to Ask Your Mormon Friend, I was astonished to find in it evidence of a talent for misunderstanding arguments that can only be described as awe-inspiring. (The book's authors, Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson, are the principal figures at an operation called "Mormonism Research Ministry," based in El Cajon, California, which, among other things, actively fights Mormonism in the former Soviet Union and distributes hostile propaganda at the dedication of Latter-day Saint temples.)

"Drs. Peterson and Ricks," report McKeever and Johnson, "attempted to downplay the severity of Christianity's depravity by claiming that Smith merely referred to the local churches at the time of his youth." And in support of this reading of Offenders for a Word, they quote it as follows:

What the Lord told Joseph Smith in the grove was that the churches and creeds of 1820 were defective and distorted by error. He did not say that they were entirely and utterly wrong (since they preserved much truth), nor did he say that each and every Christian church would always be wrong. . . . He did not say that Christianity, as such, is false. There is nothing logically wrong with saying that the churches of 1820 were
incorrect on many important issues ("corrupt"), and then saying that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (organized in 1830) is true.

"Was Smith," demand McKeever and Johnson, "really referring only to the churches of 1820?" Obviously not. "To draw such a conclusion undermines the very existence of the LDS Church as well as goes against the pronounced statements of many Mormon leaders." And then, as the coup de grace, McKeever and Johnson provide several quotations from Elder Bruce R. McConkie that are clearly "contrary to what these professors claim." 5

But "these professors," I can testify with some authority, have never even thought of such an argument as McKeever and Johnson attribute to us. Where, in the passage that they quote from us, is there even the slightest reference to "local churches"? Or to "locality"? Where is there any mention of geography at all? Why do McKeever and Johnson omit Robert McKay's argument, to which we are responding? Why do they give no context for our statement? Why do they omit an important sentence ("Nor did he include the as-yet-unorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in his judgment") that works against their misreading? Do they really think that we are referring to 1820 as distinct from, say, 1819 and 1814? (That year was chosen only for the obvious reason that it was the year of the First Vision, and, thus, the year of the statement under examination. But the Christianity of 1820 was not hermetically sealed off from what went before; indisputably it included such elements of older date as the papacy, the Nicene Creed, Calvin's Institutes, the notion of sola scriptura, and the philosophical theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. These too, I do not doubt, fell under the divine judgment.)

Such a misguided response to our argument, I thought, said a lot about Bill McKeever, Eric Johnson, and the methods they use to assault Latter-day Saint beliefs. Imagine my surprise, however, when I ran across exactly the same quotation from Offenders for a

Word with exactly the same omissions and exactly the same misreading in yet another anti-Mormon tome. This one, entitled Reasoning from the Scriptures with the Mormons and published in 1995, was written by Ron Rhodes and Marian Bodine. (They are affiliated with southern California’s so-called Christian Research Institute, a group founded by the late “Dr.” Walter Martin and currently led by Ed Decker’s enthusiastic supporter, Hank Hanegraaff.)

Following their quotation from Offenders for a Word, Rhodes and Bodine devastate us with an absolutely irrefutable point that has no discernible relevance to anything we have ever thought, said, or written: “This revisionist line of reasoning,” they announce, “fails because, if this were so, all Joseph Smith had to do was move to a neighboring community and seek out a minister who wasn’t corrupt. It wouldn’t have been necessary to completely ‘restore’ the church of Jesus Christ on earth by founding the Mormon church.”

Why, I wonder, do I sometimes feel like a straw man? Professor William Hamblin and I, who have been reading and responding to this sort of stuff for years, occasionally laugh about a film that might be made of our encounters. We like to call it Bill and Dan’s Excellent Adventure in Anti-Mormon Zombie Hell.

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7 Ron Rhodes and Marian Bodine, Reasoning from the Scriptures with the Mormons (Eugene: Harvest House, 1995), 60. One’s suspicion that Rhodes and Bodine have not really looked at the original passage increases when one observes, in their endnoted reference to Offenders for a Word (p. 399 n. 42), that they get the subtitle slightly wrong and that their citation of the page reference is inaccurate by a factor of forty pages.
II. "Why Does Baloney Reject the Grinder!?"  

No stronger defender of the faith in modern times has arisen than the late Dr. [sic] Walter Martin, founder of the Christian Research Institute, who publicly challenged, rebuked, and debated the false cults and false teachers of the last generation.

We stand therefore with those who have gone before us and say, "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Corinthians 5:11).

Ed Decker

In the issue of the Review immediately prior to this one, I critiqued the notorious Ed Decker's quite awful Decker's Complete Handbook on Mormonism. Thereupon, urged to it by a zealous reader in California (who had actually already contacted Mr. Decker's headquarters in Issaquah, Washington, and who now informed me that "the ball was in my court"), I sent a FAX to Ed Decker on 17 October 1995, offering to debate him publicly.

On the last day of November 1995, I received a polite letter from Mr. Decker declining my offer.

Are you surprised?

III. The Joseph Seminar

It would be arrogant and foolish for the layperson to ignore or dismiss the work of the historical scholar. However, it is by no means too much for the layperson to ask the historical scholar, who is so keen on understanding human life in its cultural context, to have a sense of the relativity of historical scholarship itself. Once the "relativizer has been relativized," it will no

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8 William F. Buckley, Jr., on why Robert F. Kennedy had rejected an invitation to appear on Buckley's television program, Firing Line (quoted in Time [3 November 1967]: 70).
9 Decker, Decker's Complete Handbook on Mormonism, 47.
11 I am indebted to my friend and colleague William J. Hamblin for this felicitous phrase.
longer be possible for the tribe of historical scholars to take a superior and arrogant attitude toward the members of religious communities, as if such communities were the only ones with biases.

C. Stephen Evans

A recent issue of the relatively liberal magazine *Bible Review* contains a pair of interesting articles by, respectively, Professor Luke T. Johnson of the Candler School of Theology at Emory University and Professor Baruch Halpern of Pennsylvania State University. Each article confronts and criticizes tendencies toward extreme skepticism in contemporary biblical studies. But those who have followed the present *Review* over the past several years will need little help to see a number of similarities between some of the controversies that have swirled around it and the disputes that wrack the world of biblical studies at large. The articles also reminded me of some other things that have come to my attention in recent months, items that I thought might be of interest to readers of the *Review*.

Professor Johnson’s article focuses largely, though not exclusively, on the so-called “Jesus Seminar,” a group founded in 1985 to address the question of what we can know about the historical Jesus of Nazareth, and to make its positions known to the general public via the mass media. By any account, the Seminar—which began with thirty “fellows” and now has approximately two hundred—has been spectacularly successful in the latter endeavor. Its “reports”—liberally spiced with the “scandalous sound bites” so beloved by the mass media—have been prominently displayed on the covers of popular magazines and on the front pages of major newspapers. Its most recent book, *The Five

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Gospels, has been a best-seller.\(^\text{15}\) Paul Verhoeven, the Dutch-born director of such film classics as *Robocop*, *Total Recall*, *Basic Instinct*, and *Showgirls*, is a fellow of the Seminar and has been associated with it almost since its inception. He is now writing a script about the life of Christ which will be at least partially based on the work of the Seminar (and on which he has actually presented a paper to the other fellows).\(^\text{16}\) Late last night, as I was getting ready for bed, I flipped on our bedroom television set to a national cable channel and, of all things, caught the last minute or two of an interview with John Dominic Crossan, a former Catholic priest and a cofounder of the Jesus Seminar. He was explaining that the definitive discovery of the dead body of Jesus of Nazareth, were such a thing ever to happen, would have no real impact upon true Christianity. But, interestingly, he was not entirely forthright about his position: The Jesus Seminar determined early in 1995, by a nearly unanimous vote, that the resurrection of Christ did not happen. "It's more likely, the Seminar fellows decided, that Jesus' crucified corpse 'rotted in some unknown grave,' as a press release by the Santa Rosa, California-based group put it. Consumption by scavenger dogs, a pet theory of Seminar co-chair John Dominic Crossan, was another possible fate for Jesus' body, the fellows agreed."\(^\text{17}\)

The Jesus Seminar has been the most visible component of what has been termed "the third quest for the historical Jesus."\(^\text{18}\) The first began in the mid-eighteenth century, when intellectuals of the Enlightenment tried to sort out and distinguish the attractive ethical teachings of Jesus from what they regarded as the quaint or pernicious superstitions (such as the story of the Savior's walking


\(^\text{18}\) Craig L. Blomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?" in *Jesus under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 18–28, taking a slightly different approach, views the Jesus Seminar as distinct from a more moderate "third quest," rather than as a radical element within it.
on the water, or his transformation of water into wine) that had come to encrust true Christianity like barnacles on an old ship’s hull. (Thomas Jefferson’s famous revision of the Bible—he is said to have used a razor blade to cut references to the supernatural out of his copy—should be seen as an example of this process.) These eighteenth-century writers, not surprisingly, came up with a very eighteenth-century Jesus, a kind of philosophe who gave his life for the cause of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The quest then really picked up momentum in the nineteenth century, continuing until it was brought to ruin by Albert Schweitzer’s classic The Quest of the Historical Jesus (originally published in 1906, in German, as Von Reimarus zu Wrede), which argued that the real Jesus was not the humanistic ethical teacher portrayed by liberal theologians, but rather an apocalyptic preacher with whom they would have been extremely uncomfortable. Nowadays, it is generally recognized that the “first quest” probably tells us more about the questers, about the optimistic liberalism of the nineteenth century, for example, than about the actual, first-century Palestinian Jesus. “But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man’s true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus.”

The turn-of-the-century theologian George Tyrrell recognized exactly this in the writings on the subject of Adolph von Harnack, one of the very greatest figures in Leben-Jesu-Forschung as well as in the historiography of Christian doctrine. “The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection,” wrote Tyrrell, “of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.”

The second “quest for the historical Jesus” occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, under the influence of Rudolf Bultmann and his extremely skeptical school. Bultmann was a German existentialist, and he believed that, since they certainly could not be taken as real history, all of the stories about Jesus had to be “demytholo-

gized” in order to find their real meaning—which turned out to be existentialism. (One is reminded of Philo of Alexandria, the important first-century Jewish Middle Platonist who subjected the Old Testament to a close allegorical reading, and discovered that it really taught [surprise!] Middle Platonism.) The second quest cannot be given so conclusive an end-date as the first quest, for the simple reason that no Albert Schweitzer arose to give it a definitive quietus. In many senses, it lives on even today in some circles. But existentialism is rather out of fashion lately, and the “third quest,” we can now see, is unmistakably distinct.

With its exceptionally distrustful approach to the subject—it accepts as authentic only about eighteen percent of the sayings traditionally ascribed to Jesus and seems to regard any scriptural claims about him as being false unless they can be decisively proven otherwise—the Jesus Seminar has given a very negative twist to the current “quest.” This, of course, has aroused considerable controversy. And not merely a theoretical one. For virtually all of what serious Christians believe and do in the present and hope for in the future is tied up with accounts of Jesus that were written in the distant past. “Whatever else Christianity means or ever meant,” wrote G. K. Chesterton, speaking, no doubt, for many hundreds of millions of Christians before and since, “it obviously means or meant an interference with the physical sorrows of humanity by the physical appearance of Divinity. If it does not mean that, I cannot conceive what it does mean. There seems to be no point in the story.”

The Jesus Seminar relies a great deal on extracanonical writings, especially on the Gospel of Thomas, which, although it dates from several centuries after the time of Christ and exists only in a Coptic translation from a presumed Greek original, is regarded by some scholars (on the basis, it must be observed, of “no actual evidence”) as a very early witness to primitive Christian teaching. This fascination with Thomas and other such documents is one of the things that leaves Professor Johnson, in contemplating the work of the Seminar, struck by “the way the hermeneutics of suspicion is applied to virtually everything in the New Testament

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22 The quoted phrase is from Blomberg, “Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?” 23. See also Hays, “The Corrected Jesus,” 44.
and to virtually nothing outside it.”23 For the Jesus Seminar also places a great deal of confidence, when looking at the canonical gospels, in what is sometimes called the “criterion of dissimilarity,” according to which most statements attributed to Jesus in the four canonical gospels must be rejected because they could have originated in the early church or might have been similar to the rabbinic teachings of Jesus’ time. “The idea,” says one critic of the Seminar, “is that we can only be sure of those sayings of Jesus that fit with neither the early church nor first-century Judaism. (By the same reasoning, future historians would judge as authentic words of Newt Gingrich only those statements that are dissimilar from those of other Republicans.)”24

Such methodology seems breathtaking in its silliness. Even for me, believing as I do in an apostasy from the primitive Christian church, it is preposterous to imagine that the Christians of the second, third, and fourth centuries taught nothing in common with their Founder. It is inconceivable that they would have been willing to die for someone whose teachings they had utterly and absolutely repudiated. Professor Craig Blomberg makes a very cogent point in this regard, when he observes that such a scenario requires the assumption that someone, about a generation removed from the events in question, radically transformed the authentic information about Jesus that was circulating at that time, superimposed a body of material four times as large, fabricated almost entirely out of whole cloth, while the church suffered sufficient collective amnesia to accept the transformation as legitimate. . . . [But] there is no known parallel in the history of religion to such a radical transformation of a famous teacher or leader in so short a period of time, namely, during the lives of eyewitnesses of his or her life and work, and no identifiable stimulus among the followers of Jesus sufficient to create such a change.25

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23 Johnson, “The Search for (the Wrong) Jesus,” 23.
24 Evans, “Can the New Jesus Save Us?” 6.
Nor do I see why Jesus’ teachings need be totally unique.26 (One is reminded of Fawn Brodie’s ludicrous complaint that Joseph Smith offered “no new Sermon on the Mount, no new saga of redemption.”27 As if there were something wrong with the old ones.) But the Jesus Seminar’s procedure, by purporting to destroy what historical evidence we do possess about the life of Christ, clears the way for the groundless fantasizing of Crossan and his like. (There is no more actual evidence for his “scavenger dogs” than there is for the proposition that Jesus was really abducted by space aliens.)

Professor Johnson criticizes the Jesus Seminar for its “decade of self-promotion” and “media manipulation,” a combination of “messianism and hucksterism in equal measure,” as well as for “the lack of true critical scholarship running—in varying degrees, to be sure—through all [its] publications.”28 (Duke University’s Richard B. Hays, remarking on the pompous dedication of the Seminar’s book The Five Gospels to Galileo, Jefferson, and pioneer life-of-Jesus writer D. F. Strauss, wonders why the circus showman P. T. Barnum wasn’t included as well.)29 Some of us, reading Dr. Johnson’s description of “media manipulation,” should really be pardoned for being immediately overcome by an intense feeling of déjà vu. We have seen this before. More than one of us has noted, on the part of certain dissident critics of traditional Latter-day Saint belief, “an attempt to win in the arena of public relations and rhetoric what they are apparently unable to win in the arena of evidence and analysis.”30 Unfortunately, the

26 The late literary critic Edmund Wilson argues from the same baseless assumption in his embarrassing The Dead Sea Scrolls (Glasgow: Collins, 1985).
media are prone to be manipulated by reductionist critics of religion because, as a number of studies have shown, print and broadcast journalists tend to be secularized, and even religiously tone-deaf.31 (Non-Christian religions, especially Native American and East Asian ones, seem to have certain advantages, but this is almost certainly because of secular allegiance to the ideal of multiculturalism, rather than owing to any great appreciation for such faith systems in themselves.) Additionally, I suspect, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may be an especially good media target because of the reflexively hostile attitude held by many journalists toward large corporations, among which they reckon the Church, and toward sociopolitical conservatism, which they see embodied in the Church as well as in its attendant culture. Thus critics of Christianity in general and Mormonism in particular may well have an innate advantage when fighting for their positions in the media. This, I am sure, is why they often choose to do so.

Still, the second of Professor Johnson’s criticisms of the Jesus Seminar (its “lack of true critical scholarship”), is almost certainly the more important. (He would, perhaps, have enjoyed the very revealing remark made by the revisionist cultural-Mormon historian Dale Morgan to Fawn Brodie: “We are only critical,” Morgan commented, “about the things we don’t want to believe.”)32 Professor Johnson contends that the judgments, by fellows of the Seminar and like-minded writers, of what is and attempts to deal with Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 6/1 (1994). It is highly unfortunate that the Signature press release, a revealing and embarrassing document, was evidently ignored by all the media outlets to which it was sent. Nevertheless, one enterprising pair of writers (who shall remain nameless) composed a reply to it, entitled “Signature Author Fails to Respond to Critique,” which they sent out to interested parties. For related discussions, see Daniel C. Peterson, “Editor’s Introduction: Questions to Legal Answers,” Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 4 (1992): vii–lxxvi; Daniel C. Peterson, “Editor’s Introduction,” Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 6/1 (1994): v–xii; Daniel C. Peterson, “Text and Context,” Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 6/1 (1994): 524–62.


what is not authentically historical in the gospel narratives are based on "circular and subjective criteria." A good example of this can be found in the quite contradictory works of two prominent contemporary radical New Testament scholars, both of whom share a commitment to what is called "historical-critical method" and to releasing modern men and women from the chains of ecclesiastical dogmatism, and both of whom are fellows of the Jesus Seminar. One, Burton Mack, depicts Jesus as a wandering Cynic, a sage who disdained the conventional religion of his day. New Testament passages that represent Jesus as affirming the Law of Moses, says Mack, are fictional later creations of the Christian church, which, in a deliberate effort at something like Weber's "routinization of charisma," sought to tame, to domesticate, the free-spirited, rather hippielike historical Jesus. For Michael Goulder, by contrast, Jesus was a pious Jew. Positive statements about the Law of Moses, therefore, are historically authentic, while any statements critical of the Law must have been placed on the lips of Jesus by disciples of the apostle Paul who were seeking to de-Judaize their new religion. It is this kind of thing that leads Professor Johnson to comment that, throughout much of the most radical current scholarship on the life of Jesus, "there is much assertion, little argument." Professor Hays, alluding to the large element of subjectivism in the supposedly scientific *magnum opus* of Robert Funk and his colleagues, *The Five Gospels*, declares that "What the members of the Jesus Seminar have done, in effect, is merely to offer us an anthology of their favorite Jesus-sayings."

Such criticisms may come as a shock to some readers, who have been led to think that the radical skeptics are actually in the

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33 Johnson, "The Search for (the Wrong) Jesus," 25.
34 I draw this example from Evans, "Can the New Jesus Save Us?" 8.
mainstream, rather than on the fringes, of modern New Testament scholarship. (Subscribers to one quarterly periodical, for example, which rather impishly continues to style itself "A Journal of Mormon Thought," have been treated, under its current masters, to at least five articles from fellows of the Jesus Seminar—none of whom are Mormons—in somewhat less than the last three years.)

Many lay readers have, no doubt, supposed that radical revisionist scholarship must, surely, rest on a firm foundation of, oh, maybe spectacular archaeological finds, or new manuscript discoveries, or revolutionary new understandings of esoteric Greek partipiles, or some such thing. They may have suspected that those who resist recent efforts to recast Jesus as a simple Mediterranean peasant, or a wandering Cynic, or a gay magician, are simply obscurantists, despairingly conducting a hopeless rear-guard defense against the advancing forces of Science and Truth. It may surprise them to learn that there are many scholars, including some very good and highly respected authorities, who think that the situation is precisely the reverse. I well recall, from a summer seminar at Princeton in 1994, the unexpectedly negative reaction

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38 This point is forcibly made by Blomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?" 18–20. Evans, "Can the New Jesus Save Us?" 8, uses another argument from Burton Mack, along with some elementary probability calculations, to illustrate the extremely conjectural nature of one of Professor Mack's central claims.
that the mere mention of the Jesus Seminar received from my colleagues there—none of whom could even remotely be considered “conservative.” One, indeed, who was (incidentally) a widely published expert on the Gospel of Thomas and, so far as I can determine, an agnostic, had been invited to join the Jesus Seminar. He had, he told me, attended one session, but had left in disgust. The eminent German scholar Hans Dieter Betz, too, remarks that “the presumed presence of Cynics in the Galilean society in which Jesus lived is mostly fanciful conjecture. The evidence for Cynicism [by which, of course, he means not an attitude, but the ancient philosophical movement that went by that name] is limited to Gadara and Tyre, Hellenistic cities outside Galilee.”

Professor Gerald O’Collins labels Burton Mack’s work on the life of Jesus—which, along with that of the ubiquitous Crossan, advances the Cynic hypothesis—a “distortion.” Professor Hays terms the theories of the Jesus Seminar “idiosyncratic,” “bizarre,” full of “fantasy” and “circular reasoning,” and laments that “their attempt to present these views as ‘the assured results of critical scholarship’ is—one must say it—reprehensible deception.”

So it would seem that at least some ultraliberal scholars of New Testament subjects may not be perfectly objective evidence-processors. But perhaps this is a disease restricted solely to New Testament studies? Not at all. Professor Baruch Halpern, a leading Jewish scholar who is not known as a defender of conservative

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39 Cited by O’Collins, Christology, 217 n. 18. On pp. 222-23, Professor O’Collins offers John Elliott, Martin Hengel, Bruce Malina, Jerome Neyrey, and Gerd Theissen as representatives of “the best research on the socio-historical context of Jesus and the first Christians,” contrasting their work with “the worst of such research” (under which rubric he mentions only Jesus Seminar fellow Burton Mack). Raymond Brown, The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels (New York: Doubleday, 1994), will serve as another good example of a major scholar, hardly a fundamentalist, who accepts the essential accuracy of the canonical gospels. John P. Meier, author of A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus (New York: Doubleday, 1991), might serve as another. Prominent scholars including W. A. Meeks, N. T. Wright, J. Fitzmyer, L. S. Cunningham, and J. D. G. Dunn have also publicly criticized the Jesus Seminar.

40 O’Collins, Christology, 223 n. 28.

41 Hays, “The Corrected Jesus,” 44-47. On p. 44, Professor Hays is a bit more gentle. Expressing only “some suspicion . . . concerning the candor of the editors” of The Five Gospels.
theological positions, points in his turn to what he calls “minimalists” in the scholarship on the Hebrew Bible (naming among them, specifically, Philip R. Davies, Thomas L. Thompson, John Van Seters, and the late Gösta W. Ahlström, with whom I once spent a pleasant afternoon at the Little Big Horn in Montana). Professor Halpern observes that the recent discovery of a ninth-century B.C.E. inscription at Tel Dan—the first reference to the House of David in an extrabiblical source—“is causing extraordinary contortions among scholars who have maintained that the Bible’s history of the early Israelite monarchy is simply fiction.” (They find it “embarrassing,” he says.)

One scholar has gone so far as to suggest that the inscription may be a fake, presumably salted in the tell by some desperate biblical literalist. Other scholars in this camp have advanced arguments no less far-fetched in an attempt somehow to eliminate the reference to David—arguing, for example, that the three Semitic letters forming David’s name should really be read as “uncle” or “kettle.”

(Faithful readers of this Review will recall John Gee’s description of some strikingly similar antics from a couple of years ago, in connection with the book of Abraham.) Desperate radical “minimalists,” as Professor Halpern terms them, are, he says, “fighting a rear-guard action,” and he does not hesitate to describe their reasoning as “nonsense.”

Professor Halpern’s comments echo those of A. F. Rainey, of Israel’s Tel Aviv University, whose recent review of the 1992 book In Search of Ancient Israel, by Philip R. Davies, is entitled “Uncritical Criticism.” Far from impressed with its logic and evidence, Professor Rainey sees the book rather as the product of a certain “fashion” in scholarship and describes it as emerging from an “unbridled imagination,” “nothing but idle fancy,”

telling us in some ways more about Davies than about the ancient Near East. Analyzing one of Davies’s major themes, Rainey pronounces it “nonsense,” believable only to the “gullible,” requiring “more blind credulity than the view that Davies seeks to refute.” Rainey is hardly a fundamentalist; he acknowledges the existence of errors and tendentiousness in the biblical narratives. But he does not think much of the radically skeptical position on the Old Testament. Like Halpern, he links Davies with Thomas L. Thompson, “who,” he remarks, “is well on the way to becoming the guru of the ‘uncritical critics’”; the works of both are “shot through with sophisticated conceits that,” he declares, “have no basis.” The problem is that there is little or no evidence for the radical skeptics’ position, while a considerable amount of evidence argues against them. “It is not in the power of late twentieth-century skeptics to dismiss this testimony with a wave of a sarcastic hand.” “Davies’ book,” he says simply, “deserves to be forgotten.”

Both Baruch Halpern and A. F. Rainey suggest, contrary to the image that some innocent readers may entertain of the radical revisionists as representing the latest and best in rigorous, skeptical, evidence-not-dogma-driven scholarship, that the “minimalists” would profit greatly by better training in and more exposure to the discipline of ancient history. Professor Craig L. Blomberg makes a closely related point when he observes that “No responsible historian would ever approach the biographies of Alexander, Augustus, or Apollonius with the approaches of Crossan or [Jesus Seminar founder Robert W.] Funk. We should not treat Jesus this

46 Ibid., 102; cf. p. 103.
49 Ibid.
way either."51 Luke Johnson remarks that the claim of the Jesus Seminar to represent the cream of current thought on the New Testament rings rather hollow in view of the fact that "Most of the participants are in relatively undistinguished academic positions. Some are not in the strict sense in academic positions at all."52 Faced with analogously self-glorifying claims on the part of some revisionist writers on Mormonism, to the effect that they are real scholars while those involved with FARMS haven’t a clue about scholarly methodology, a few of us decided to do as Luke Johnson and others have now done. We looked at their credentials. Some considered this extremely rude, *ad hominem*, and even vicious. But we did not raise the issue in the first place, and we have responded to our critics much as Luke Johnson does: "These observations do not reflect on the seriousness or ability of the members [of the Jesus Seminar]. They are meant only to deflate the sometimes grandiose claims made by and for the Seminar as representing critical New Testament scholarship. It patently does no such thing."53 "These remarks,” Professor Craig L. Blomberg has written, in the course of a similar observation about credentials,

are not meant to be taken in an *ad hominem* fashion, nor are they offered as a substitute for a detailed analysis and critique of the points they raise. Rather, they are meant as a response to the false but widespread perception that the ideas propagated by the Jesus Seminar represent the views of the majority of experts who are in a privileged position to know and disseminate the real facts to the public.54

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51 Blomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?" 27.
Although Professor Johnson says that such mediagenic scholarship as that exemplified in the Jesus Seminar has little real value in itself, he feels that it does nonetheless serve a useful function. “The real significance of these highly public exhibits is that they have shown the wider world just how shaky some of the premises, and how shoddy some of the procedures, are in a great deal of biblical scholarship.”55 And it is true that, as radical New Testament criticism has begun to emerge from academic obscurity into the often star-struck spotlight of the media, other observers have begun to notice what one acute reader independently terms “the dubious assumptions and shaky reasoning” that undergird radical New Testament scholarship.56 But this, too, is shocking! Can it really be the case that practitioners of biblical studies rely not merely on the evidence, but on presuppositions as well? Yes, it is. Certainly Harvard’s Jon D. Levenson thinks so. “Though some of its practitioners like to present it as philosophically and theologically neutral,” he notes, “historical criticism is not without assumptions of its own.”57 (In certain extreme cases, one is compelled to remember C. S. Lewis’s observation about reductionist debunkers of religious faith, the residents of his allegorical city of Zeitgeistheim: “They pretend that their researches lead to that doctrine: but in fact they assume that doctrine first and interpret...

56 Evans, “Can the New Jesus Save Us?” 8. Among useful and very recent books critical of such scholarship are Gregory A. Boyd, Cynic Sage or Son of God? Recovering the Real Jesus in an Age of Revisionist Replies (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1995); Johnson, The Real Jesus; Wilkins and Moreland, eds., Jesus under Fire; Ben Witherington III, The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995). Stephen T. Davis, Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), is an intriguing philosophical defense of the resurrection of Christ which, among other things, critiques Van Harvey, a writer central to the argument advanced by Edward H. Ashment, “Historiography of the Canon,” in Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 281–301. Professor Evans’s own The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History (a clever and significant title, for those who get it) is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.
their researches by it.")58 And the assumptions of "historical criticism" vary from scholar to scholar.

Some writers on the fringes of the Church, however, perhaps a bit behind the times, still seem to entertain the notion that preconceived ideas and ideology, though they drive the work of pseudoscholarly apologists, have no impact on Critical Scholarship. Such scholarship, they seem to feel, is almost as scientific and objective as chemical analysis. (A leading employee at Signature Books in Salt Lake City called in May of 1991 to inform me, among other things, that while FARMS has a point of view that is lethal to its scholarly pretensions, Signature has no point of view at all. At Signature Books, he told me, people simply allow the facts to speak for themselves.) Of course, it is now commonly realized in more advanced circles that even the sciences and such seemingly bloodless disciplines as mathematical logic presuppose nonempirical, nonprovable, even ideological assumptions,59 so that it becomes difficult to see why some folks grow apoplectic at observations of the same thing in more sensitive and emotional areas like biblical or religious studies. (Will and Ariel Durant are supposed to have said that history is mostly guessing, and the rest is prejudice.) Nonetheless, it is often implied that radical skepticism in biblical scholarship represents nothing but the inexorable advance of value-neutral Truth. And if disconcerting conclusions have been reached, why, they have simply been forced upon Objective Critical Thinkers by the Facts, so that only a bunch of Neanderthals could possibly complain. "Scholars did not set out," declares one Latter-day Saint dissident, "to 'tear asunder' the biblical text, or to impose a particular critical viewpoint on the text. Instead, it was noted that the Bible is frequently in tension

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59 See, for instance, the discussions by Phillip E. Johnson, Reason in the Balance: The Case against Naturalism in Science, Law and Education (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), and William Barrett, The Illusion of Technique: A Search for Meaning in a Technological Civilization (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1979), 3–117. George M. Marsden, The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), depicts, with prodigious learning, the process by which what Phillip Johnson terms "methodological naturalism" has become the absolute ruler of the American academic establishment.
with itself, and the critical scholar attempts to determine how this tension arose.\footnote{Thompson, "Searching for the 'Historical Jesus,'" 59.} He shows no awareness that the problems that are recognized, and the solutions that are proposed for these real or imagined problems, are not, and cannot in the nature of things be, free of "viewpoints" and the influence of general world views. He seems oblivious to "the power of assumptions, motives, and imagination to shape the way we make sense of the 'facts' that come to us from the past."\footnote{Mark D. Steinberg and Vladimir M. Khrustalëv, The Fall of the Romanovs: Political Dreams and Personal Struggles in a Time of Revolution (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 296, commenting on how assumptions affect the consideration of precisely what happened even in a relatively recent and quite well-documented historical occurrence. For a fine recent discussion of evidence and proof in general and as they relate to the Book of Mormon, see John W. Welch, "The Power of Evidence in the Nurturing of Faith," in Nurturing Faith through the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 149–86.} In fact, it is on the basis of such presumably objective, critical New Testament scholarship that he rejects the claimed antiquity of the Book of Mormon: "The single greatest anachronism in my opinion is that the Jesus of the Book of Mormon is not the historical Jesus who lived and taught in Palestine [and who is revealed, not in the gospel accounts, but in the writings of certain late twentieth-century liberal biblical scholars], but the exalted, divinized Jesus as described by John the evangelist."\footnote{Stephen E. Thompson, "Balancing Acts," 4. This is an unpublished paper delivered at the Sunstone East symposium in 1993 (manuscript in my possession).} There are, however, prominent authorities—not Latter-day Saints, and certainly not Mormon apologists—who point out that it is the purest fantasy to imagine that the world of contemporary biblical studies is divided, \textit{simpliciter}, between purely objective, scientific biblical scholarship (embodied in the persons of the radical skeptics), on the one hand, and the opposing forces of subjectivist theological reaction and irrationality on the other. Thus, reviewing some of the more spectacular claims of recent Jesus scholarship, Professor Johnson concludes that "this, I need
scarcely point out, is not critical history. It is the uncritical canoni-
ization of an ideological assumption.63

But, of course, it is the nature of ideology to be uncritically ac-
cepted. That is what distinguishes ideology from philosophy. As
feminist scholars Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge have written,

ideology connotes that some of the ideas people hold are unarticulated and unacknowledged. Furthermore, in
certain of its usages, ideology conveys the suspicion that the basic beliefs in question may be distorted and
self-serving. Thus, one speaks of “analyzing” a philosophy of life but of “disclosing” or “unmasking” an ideology—the implication being that the person
who subscribes to an ideology will be either reluctant to
own up to it or unable to examine it critically.

The identification of someone’s allegiance to an
ideology normally rests on indirect or circumstantial
evidence. One looks for recurring patterns of behavior
and characteristic locutions as well as explicit formul-
ations . . .

People usually adopt ideological stances unknow-
ingly and rarely subject them to systematic scrutiny.64

So Professor Johnson makes a serious charge when he con-
tends that certain significant works of recent Jesus scholarship are
ideologically driven rather than based on evidence. But he is quite
deliberate in his contention. “The reasons” undergirding many
of the positions taken in the new revisionist books, he says, “are
more ideological than historiographical.”65 They emphatically
do not flow from a simple, value-neutral contemplation of the
unalloyed facts of history, for the presuppositions on which the
system is based “are not properly historical observations. They
are, rather, ideological commitments.”66 And, again, this is not
only the situation in New Testament studies. Jon Levenson, sur-

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63 Johnson, “The Search for (the Wrong) Jesus,” 25.
64 Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women’s Studies (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 48–49.
65 Johnson, “The Search for (the Wrong) Jesus,” 23.
66 Ibid., 44.
veying similar trends in studies of the Old Testament, observes that some interpreters of the Hebrew Bible "are actually asserting a secular analogy to a religious revelation: they are claiming to have a definitive insight, not empirically derived, into the meaning of things. . . . The effect of such a claim, almost never acknowledged, is . . . to set up a hierarchy. Only at the apex of this hierarchy stand not power-hungry kings and self-interested bishops, but (to borrow a term from Paul Mankowski) a 'new clerisy' of academic theorists."67

And if this is true in the relatively moderate mainstream of biblical scholarship (as it must, necessarily, given the human condition, be the case in all forms of human intellectual endeavor), it is certainly so on the radical fringes of the discipline. And these assumptions or presuppositions may not all be intellectual in character. They may, and no doubt often do, grow out of the particular life history and psychology of the scholar. In fact, Professor Halpern concludes that, "at the extremes, the reaction against tradition is emotional, not intellectual."68 C. Stephen Evans, an evangelical Protestant professor of philosophy, offers an astute observation in this regard:

It hardly seems an accident that the conclusions of biblical scholars who are fairly orthodox in their theology tend to be historically conservative-to-moderate in tone. (I have in mind here scholars such as Howard Marshall, F. F. Bruce, Robert Stein, James D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright, and Catholics such as Raymond Brown and John Meier.) Scholars who are less committed to orthodoxy or positively opposed to historic Christian faith, such as [Burton] Mack and [John Dominic] Crossan, often produce portraits of Jesus that are quite remote from church teachings. The latter type of scholar often speaks disparagingly of the former, implying that the more traditional scholar is less than fully committed to "calling them as they see them" and "letting the chips fall where they may." From my layperson's perspective, it seems evident that the prior

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68 Halpern, "Erasing History," 34.
commitments of people like Mack may be pervasive in shaping the way they interpret the evidence.

That Mack does have an ideological axe to grind becomes evident in *The Lost Gospel*.\(^{69}\) He there explains that it is crucial to cultural progress to undermine the historical claims of traditional Christian faith: "The Christian gospel, focusing as it does on crucifixion as the guarantee for apocalyptic salvation, has somehow given its blessing to patterns of personal and political behavior that often have had disastrous consequences." Christianity is at least partly responsible for such evils as colonial imperialism, the slave trade, and the Indian wars. It is only when we recognize that the founding Christian narrative is a mythical creation that we will be free to criticize it and perhaps to devise better, more socially progressive myths. There is much that could be said about Mack’s claims; my point here is that he should not pretend that he and other members of the Jesus Seminar approach the historical evidence with no ideological commitments.\(^ {70}\)

Jon Levenson, speaking from a background in Jewish studies, says much the same thing. He cites Peter Berger’s project of "relativizing the relativizers," but remarks that, "in the context at hand, it would be more accurately termed ‘suspecting the hermeneutics of suspicion.’" By posing the question of the modern interpreters’ own place in reality as they sketch it, one challenges them to justify their claim, express or implicit, of independence from the dynamics they depict as ultimate." In other words, if the thought of all other people is historically conditioned and psychologically constrained, one must ask the revisionists just how they have managed to transcend the human condition. "Might it be the case," asks Professor Levenson,

that the interpretation of religion as only a mystification of power arrangements, for example, is itself an


\(^{70}\) Evans, "Can the New Jesus Save Us?" 7.
item in a discourse of power in which a new group, supported by new social arrangements, asserts its hegemony? If so—if, that is, there can be no transcendence over the social relationships in which we are embedded—then the assertion that the old order ought to bow to the new is groundless, for it presupposes the normativity that it also precludes.71

But back to the specifics of radical New Testament scholarship. “Working through this literature,” reports Professor Johnson, “I have not been able to make up my mind whether its colloquial and casual discourse is a function of sloppiness or of cynicism,” though he leans toward the idea that at least some of the ambiguity is “deliberate.”72 Throughout it all, there is an “implicit—and sometimes explicit—theological agenda.”73 (Again, diligent readers of the Review of Books on the Book of Mormon will recall discussions of what appears to be an analogous case of a hidden agenda—an agenda that is itself not dissimilar to that of the “minimalists.”)74 “On the one hand,” Professor Johnson says, “the authors claim to be doing ‘critical scholarship,’ without presupposition or bias, with the neutral assessment of sources, with the goal of simply discovering who Jesus ‘really was.’” On the other hand, however, such radical scholarship has an unmistakably revisionist agenda.

Once more, the Jesus Seminar is an egregious example, claiming out of one side of its mouth that it is practicing the most sober and critical research, yet from the other side of its mouth (both sides represented mostly by Robert Funk, chief spokesperson) claiming at the very outset of the project that it intends to use the assured results of scholarship to save Christianity from its evangelical captors.”75

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72 Johnson, “The Search for (the Wrong) Jesus,” 22.
73 Ibid., 44.
75 Johnson, “The Search for (the Wrong) Jesus,” 22–23.
A number of dissident and hostile writers on Mormonism have made similar claims, that they—and they alone—do objective, value-neutral "critical scholarship." One critic, for instance, accuses a writer prominently associated with the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS)—who, I happen to know, does nothing even remotely of the kind—of advocating "an uncritical, dogma-driven exegesis." 76 "The Seminar's disingenuous self-representation," writes Professor Hays, "stands in service of a larger agenda: the deliberate creation of a new gospel." 77

"A religion professor who has socialized with them," writes journalist Charlotte Allen, "informed me that a favorite after-hours activity for [certain] Jesus Seminar members is to belt out the rousing evangelical hymns of their church-going childhoods." 78 "Something other than disinterested historical research motivates these recent Jesus books," says Professor Johnson.

Present in all of them is a clear reformist goal, based on the conviction that traditional Christian belief is a distortion of the "real" Jesus. . . . These scholars want a new understanding of Jesus and Christian origins to have an impact on the cultural phenomenon called Christianity by removing what [Burton] Mack calls "the privilege of the Christian myth." 79

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77 Hays, "The Corrected Jesus," 47.

78 Allen, "Away with the Manger," 25. Mormon dissenters reportedly gather, in connection with certain symposia, for lusty songfests of the often mean-spirited hymn parodies in Paul Toscano and Calvin Grondahl, Music and the Broken Word: Songs for Alternate Voices (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991). For selected specimens of these parodies, see Peterson, "Questions to Legal Answers," xxix-xxxi.

79 Johnson, "The Search for (the Wrong) Jesus," 44.
(Compare the declaration of one writer associated with what might be termed the "minimalist" camp in Mormon studies: "I personally hope," he writes, "that Book of Mormon scholarship can mold a purer faith and a nobler Mormonism. I believe that a spiritual trek is at hand for Mormonism and that the scholar's word will be one of those guiding the church's future.")

History, in other words, becomes a weapon for the resolution of current issues. As one observer has noted, "the Jesus Seminar has a polemical mission: combating Christian fundamentalists who still read the Bible literally"—though it would seem that some members of the Seminar are inclined to define "fundamentalist" and "literally" in a very broad fashion, one that would apply to just about anybody who resists their thorough-going disbelief. "In their hands," says Professor Johnson of the radical revisionist writers, "what is called 'history' is really a camouflaged form of cultural critique of contemporary religious observance." And this is not merely Professor Johnson's opinion. For example, one of the Jesus Seminar's own publications, *The Parables of Jesus*, having denounced Christian ministers of the traditional (i.e., wrong) type, announces that "the Jesus Seminar is a clarion call to enlightenment. It is for those who prefer facts to fancies, history to histrionics, science to superstition." Professor Johnson expresses it in a rather different way: "The frenzied dismantling of the narratives of the New Testament...increasingly appears to be an attempt to avoid or replace the unmistakable image of Jesus limned in the pages of the New Testament."

Writing about radical revisionist approaches to the Hebrew Bible, Baruch Halpern is reminded of a story that Sir Winston Churchill used to tell: An Englishman received a telegram from...
Brazil, informing him that his mother-in-law had died and asking him for instructions. The man responded instantly, “Embalm, cremate, bury at sea. Take no chances!” Such an attitude is, of course, amusing in a story. But it is rather unhelpful in real life, as in scholarship. Yet it can be found precisely there, says Professor Halpern. “At the base of the extremism of contemporary ‘minimalism,’” he writes, “lies a hysteria no less profound than that one. One may question the motives of the hysteria—they differ in different scholars. In one the motivation may be a hatred of the Catholic Church, in another of Christianity, in another of the Jews, in another of all religion, in another of authority.”

I raised the possibility of the existence of psychological and personality factors in scholarship on Mormon topics a couple of years ago. As certainly could have been predicted, my suggestion was not well received among the usual suspects. It is not quite polite to suggest that unbelief may not derive from purely rational sources, though I suspect that those same quarters would have few difficulties in admitting psychological influences on religious belief. Yet surely C. S. Lewis is right in pointing out that both belief and unbelief can be products of wish-fulfillment, and in encouraging us to guffaw heartily at the pretensions of those who would have us think that it is only religious faith that grows out of illogical personal desires and fears: “Then John stood still on the road to think. And first he gave a shake of his shoulders, and then he put his hands to his sides, and then began to laugh till he was almost shaken to pieces. And when he had nearly finished, the vastness and impudence and simplicity of the fraud which had been practised came over him all again, and he laughed harder.”

Luke T. Johnson, too, sees psychological factors at work in radical scholarship, conditioning and constraining the more purely intellectual arguments. In the Jesus Seminar, declares Professor Johnson, it is hard to miss “delusions of grandeur emitting a definitely paranoid aura.” And, indeed, anybody who has

85 Halpern, “Erasing History,” 47.
86 Ibid.
88 Lewis, The Pilgrim’s Regress, 72; see all of book four, chapter four.
89 Johnson, “The Search for (the Wrong) Jesus,” 23.
read “The Story of the Jesus Seminar,” an extraordinary mix of glorying in persecution and sheer self-glorification, in the Seminar’s 1988 book on The Parables of Jesus, will find it difficult to dispute Professor Johnson’s verdict.90 “The fundamentalist mentality generated a climate of inquisition,” reports the introduction to the Seminar’s best-selling The Five Gospels, “that made honest scholarly judgments impossible.”91 At the very time that The Five Gospels and Crossan’s Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography were on the religious bestseller list issued by Publisher’s Weekly, Charlotte Allen reports, “Funk and other seminar fellows boast[ed] with the intensity of early Christian martyrs about their persecution by the biblically literal-minded.”92

As one specific instance of this, Professor Johnson notes that, “as the Jesus Seminar publicity would have it, scholars will lose their jobs under pressure from reactionary Christians.”93 Indeed, the Seminar says that it has already occurred. “One fellow, whose name the seminar will not reveal, reportedly lost his teaching job at a church-affiliated college on account of his participation.”94 The parallels to dissident claims about lack of intellectual freedom in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and about the supposed ascendancy of fundamentalism and neo-orthodoxy in Mormon circles, are hard to miss. (They would also be wearisome to detail.) It has been bleakly amusing, for instance, to observe certain of the dissidents—in numerous radio and television interviews, in a host of newspaper and magazine articles—accuse the Church of “silencing” them. It is difficult not to think of such things when one reads about best-selling authors lamenting the “suppression” of their work. But then, I have to think along these lines: One recent attack on FARMS suggests that those who write for the Foundation, a number of whom are employed by Brigham

90 Funk, Scott, and Butts, The Parables of Jesus, ix–xv.
93 Johnson, “The Search for (the Wrong) Jesus,” 20.
94 Allen, “Away with the Manger,” 24. Recent newspaper accounts indicate that the star of Paul Verhoeven’s film Showgirls has been effectively black-balled in Hollywood, and that Verhoeven, a fellow (as previously noted) of the Jesus Seminar, had warned her that such might be the consequences if she accepted the part. Progressive heroism is risky in high art, it seems, no less than in cutting-edge scholarship.
Young University, are motivated—nay, forced—to defend the Church by concerns about their careers.95

The deep emotions that accompany religious belief—and religious infidelity—could hardly have been expected to remain concealed in the face of such issues. And they have not. "This hysteria," says Baruch Halpern, "inheres in the nature of biblical debates. There is a tremendous emotional investment on the part of many scholars in the biblical presentation, and an equal and opposite reaction against that investment on the part of many others. Biblical archaeology has a nasty reputation for ideological polarization."96 (Note that Professor Halpern recognizes emotion on both sides of the argument, not merely on the believers' side.) Robert Funk, the founder of the Jesus Seminar, for instance, calls John P. Meier, an eminent Catholic authority on the life of Christ and a critic of the Seminar, a "blockhead."97 That, of course, is rather funny. But the invective is not always amusing.

The venom that has poured into print from the "minimalists"... and the traditionalists... is a matter of public record, [writes Professor Halpern]. Oxen have been gored all 'round, and yet "minimalists" complain about abuse—as though they have not been delivering it with regularity, insinuating that the objects of their scorn, for example, are fundamentalists.98

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96 Halpern, "Erasing History," 47.
97 Allen, "Away with the Manger," 26. Funk evidently likes this word; he has also applied it to Professor Glenn Early of the University of Santa Clara, who is a participant in the Jesus Seminar; see ibid., 30.
98 For analogous caricatures of mainstream Mormonism and faithful Mormon scholarship as "fundamentalist," see, among many others, William D. Russell, "Beyond Literalism," in The Word of God, ed. Vogel, 47–49; Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Joseph Smith's Scriptural Cosmology," in ibid., 188; Ashment, "Making the Scriptures 'Indeed One in Our Hands,'" in ibid., 251; Thompson, "Searching for the 'Historical Jesus,'" 61 n. 8 (where James E. Talmage is linked with Protestant fundamentalism); Thompson, "'Critical' Book of Mormon Scholarship," 201. (Thompson, ibid., 200–201, 205–6, is typical, incidentally, of a number of dissenting writers on Mormonism who have denounced this Review for its tone while seemingly unaware of the vitriol and
Indeed, one member of the “minimalist” camp has even urged that [the prominent radical revisionist writer] Philip Davies adopt that peculiarly American form of intellectual vindication, the lawsuit.99

Does this remind anybody of anything? (Threats of legal intimidation are not without precedent in quasi-Mormon intellectual circles.)100

The essential point of all this, I suppose, one that ought to be entirely obvious, was summed up nicely by Jon Levenson: “Secularity,” he pointed out, “is no guarantee of religious neutrality.”101 Phillip Johnson, writing of assumptions in the sciences, and primarily in biology, sketches the situation well:

A methodological naturalist defines science as the search for the best naturalistic theories. A theory would not be naturalistic if it left something (such as the existence of genetic information or consciousness) to be explained by a supernatural cause. Hence all events in evolution (before the evolution of intelligence) are assumed to be attributable to unintelligent causes. The question is not whether life (genetic information) arose by some combination of chance and chemical laws, to pick one example, but merely how it did so.102

Thus the methodological naturalist rules out anything supernatural or divine by definition. But this is not only an approach in science, and its intrusions into scholarly thinking can be extremely mockery emerging from their own camp. Let me simply say, in passing, that, if we have occasionally been guilty of levity at the expense of some of our critics, this has been because they tempted us with irresistible targets. It isn’t our fault. Like most other Americans in the late twentieth century, we are victims. A few of us, indeed, may have been born that way, with the nastiness gene—which is triggered by arrant humbuggery.)

99 Halpern, “Erasing History,” 35, 47. “Why? Anson Rainey denied that Davies was an epigraphist, a specialist in inscriptions such as that on the Tel Dan stela” (ibid., 47).
100 Consider the amazing episode described in Peterson, “Editor’s Introduction: Questions to Legal Answers,” vii–lxxvi.
102 Johnson, Reason in the Balance, 208.
subtle. Consider, for example, the double standard that Craig Blomberg identifies in some skeptical responses to the New Testament:

It is often pointed out that there is little information about Jesus that can be gleaned from other non-Christian historical reports from the ancient world. Requiring such non-Christian corroboration, of course, immediately reintroduces the false dichotomy, for it implies that Christians cannot be trusted for the information they record about Jesus. As long as someone who saw or heard about Jesus’ ministry remains unconvinced by his claims, he or she is an objective reporter; but as soon as one becomes a disciple, nothing one says can be trusted.103

Still, if Professor Johnson had desired an illustration of the methodological naturalist’s approach to a nonscientific subject, and specifically to religious history, he could not possibly have improved upon the late Dale L. Morgan’s written remarks to Juanita Brooks. Morgan, a minor historian much revered among radical revisionist writers on Mormonism, set forth his conception of “objectivity” by defining it as an objectivity on one side only of a philosophical Great Divide. With my [atheistic] point of view on God, I am incapable of accepting the claims of Joseph Smith and the Mormons, be they however so convincing. If God does not exist, how can Joseph Smith’s story have any possible validity? I will look everywhere for explanations except to the ONE explanation that is the position of the Church.104

103 Blomberg, “Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?” 39 (emphasis in the original). On page 40, Professor Blomberg goes on to show that there is actually considerable evidence about Jesus in ancient non-Christian historians.
Bernard DeVoto, reviewing Fawn Brodie's then-new biography of Joseph Smith in the *New York Herald Tribune*, recognized and praised the same essentially atheistic approach in her work: "She has written," he said, "as a detached, modern intelligence, grounded in naturalism, rejecting the supernatural." One recalls Sherlock Holmes's somewhat impatient remark to Dr. Watson: "How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?" For some writers on Mormonism and other religious topics, the existence of God is simply, from the outset, "impossible." Is it any surprise, therefore, since the action of God is ruled out in advance, that methodologies like those employed by Morgan and Brodie conclude that God did not act in Latter-day Saint history? Clearly, secularism is not religiously neutral. Secularists do not, somehow, by the sheer fact of their lack of religious commitment, emerge into a mythical world of pure, objective scholarship, beyond apologetics and polemics. Quite the contrary.

And "fundamentalism," whatever that loose and frequently pejorative term may signify, may not exist only, or even particularly, among religious believers. There are, it is true, "fundamentalists who give historical criticism no quarter." In the Christian context, they are typically to be found in the ranks of conservative Protestants. But there are also "historical critics who are fundamentalistic about their own methods." (These are the sorts of people, for instance, who smugly imagine that those who disagree with them espouse a single, monolithic, reified, almost-Platonically-archetypal form of pseudoscholarship—an inferior, less-evolved strain of mental life, for which scientific nomenclature reserves the purely descriptive appellation "the apologetic historical methodology.") Again, Professor Levenson expresses it well:

105 His endorsement, including the quoted sentence, has appeared on the dust jacket of the book for decades.
108 Edward H. Ashment, "'A Record in the Language of My Father': Evidence of Ancient Egyptian and Hebrew in the Book of Mormon," in *New
If, as I said, the belief that the real meaning of religious phenomena is available only to the outside observer is a secular analogue to religious revelation, then a system of thought like historicism, which "exempts itself from its own verdict," is a secular equivalent to fundamentalism. For though it subjects all else to critique, it asserts axiomatically its own inviolability to critique. Demanding to be the norm by means of which truth and error are disclosed, this type of thinking, by definition, can never be in error.109

One writer on Mormon and related topics fails to see that his faction, the radical revisionists, can be guilty of irrationalism and uncritical scholarship just as easily as those whom he criticizes. Indeed, having discerned the threat only on one side (his opponents'), he can see no middle ground between fundamentalism and radical skepticism. "Once one gives up the idea of an inerrant, strictly historical, biblical record," he says, "it must be admitted that there is little in the life of Jesus that can be known with certainty."110 But, again, as in the earlier case of Robert McKay, the absurdity of this claim becomes instantly apparent if we simply plug different terms into an argument of identical structure: "Once one gives up the idea of an inerrant, strictly historical [Roman chronicle/Ottoman archive/record of the War between the States], it must be admitted that there is little in the [history of Rome/of the Ottoman Empire/of the American Civil War] that can be known with certainty." Such claims, of course, would be laughed to scorn in secular historiographical circles. Yet to reject thoroughgoing and unjustified doubt in religious studies, we are told, is to be a fundamentalist. It is difficult, in the face of these groundless assertions, not to be reminded of Phillip Johnson's remark, in his recent critique of the reigning assumptions of methodological naturalism—assumptions that undergird much of the most radical scholarship in "Jesus studies" as well as,

*Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology,* ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 374 (emphasis mine). (The title of Ashment's article is, naturally, ironic.)

110 Thompson, "Searching for the 'Historical Jesus,'" 61.
I suspect, in the writings of those on the fringes of the Church who portray such scholarship as that of the irresistible mainstream: “Those who try to challenge naturalism,” writes Johnson, “are confined not in a prison cell but in a stereotype.”

Stereotypes notwithstanding, Latter-day Saints and other Christians are not obliged to accept the latest nostrums peddled by certain writers just because they are new, nor even because they are trendy and in fashion with some in the news media or have been ratified by the consensus of some scholarly group or other. Every argument and every specimen of scholarship must still be evaluated for evidence and coherence, just as it always has. And we must be ever alert for the smuggled-in premise, the polemical sleight-of-hand. The stakes are infinitely high. We shall surely find, if we abandon the gospel of Jesus Christ for some reductionist revision of it, that we have made the same trade as the biblical Esau.

“If you are going West, we must part here,” said Mr. Enlightenment, drawing up. “Unless perhaps you would care to come home with me. You see that magnificent city?” John looked down by the by-road and saw in a flat plain without any trees a huge collection of corrugated iron huts, most of which seemed rather old and rusty.

“That,” said Mr. Enlightenment, “is the city of Claptrap. You will hardly believe me when I say that I can remember it as a miserable village. When I first came here it had only forty inhabitants: it now boasts a population of twelve million, four hundred thousand, three hundred and sixty-one souls, who include, I may add, the majority of our most influential publicists and scientific popularizers. In this unprecedented development I am proud to say that I have borne no small part.”

I said at the beginning of this lengthier-than-anticipated essay that I would be commenting on “a trio of loosely related topics.”

111 Johnson, Reason in the Balance, 199.
112 Lewis, The Pilgrim’s Regress, 37.
Some readers who have made it thus far may be wondering how the first two items are related in any way to the third. The answer is simply this: Agnostic or radically revisionist critics of the restored Gospel, and fundamentalist Protestant anti-Mormons, tend to converge, united despite their other differences by their disbelief in the founding narratives and sacred scriptures of the Restoration. This is nicely illustrated by the December 1995 issue of the *Salt Lake City Messenger*, published by the dedicated "career anti-Mormons" Jerald and Sandra Tanner. They offer a number of books for sale, of which nearly a third come from Signature Books, the premier radical revisionist publisher in (broadly speaking) Mormondom. (The Tanners are emerging as an important distributor of Signature volumes.) Among a list of conventionally anti-Mormon publications such as *Mormons Answered Verse by Verse, Why We Left Mormonism, and How to Rescue Your Loved One from Mormonism*, one finds also D. Michael Quinn’s *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power;* Richard S. Van Wagoner, Sidney Rigdon: *A Portrait of Religious Excess;* H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism;* Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon;* George D. Smith, ed., *Faithful History;* Richard Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History;* and Robert N. Hullinger, *Joseph Smith’s Response to Skepticism.* Indeed, as a special gift to devout consumers of Tanner-approved and -produced materials, the last is actually being given away "with every order of $25.00 or more."113 (Perhaps, wonderful thought!, it has been remaindered.)

113 *Salt Lake City Messenger* 89 (December 1995): 1, 15–16; compare *Salt Lake City Messenger* 79 (August 1991): 16, and my discussion of the matter in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): xlvi-xlvi. One could hardly ask, by the way, for a clearer demonstration of the Tanners' opportunism and even cynicism: They distribute, as weapons against Mormonism, books whose underlying assumptions would also destroy their own cherished fundamentalist Protestantism. They just don’t mention this to their trusting (and largely fundamentalist) clientele. Intriguingly, by the way, the folks at Signature are now distributing Boyd Payne’s *Utah Celebrities: A Guide to the Stars* (1995) via the publishing name “Celestial Books.” Signature’s choice of a pseudonym (*nom de guerre?) is fascinating. One would like to know if they selected it because they have not read *Doctrine and Covenants* 76:99–106 recently—or because they have.
Ed Decker and Bob McKay and Marian Bodine and Ron Rhodes and Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson scarcely have the firepower (or the intellectual candlepower), in and of themselves, to do much damage to the claims of the restored Church. In the alliance of convenience that is emerging between such conventional anti-Mormons and the far more articulate fringe critics within the Church, though, the attempt is being made (however illegitimately) to borrow the prestige of science and scholarship for the old anti-Mormon cause. Observers of the scene should be warned, however, that some revisionist writing has the same problems with logic, evidence, and bias that have been with us since the days of Philastus Hurlbut and Eber D. Howe. They are merely more subtle.

I am grateful to all those who helped in the preparation of this issue of the Review. Most of all, I thank the reviewers themselves, but I also wish to mention Alison Coutts, Shirley S. Ricks, and Melvin J. Thorne for their editorial assistance, and John Gee, William J. Hamblin, and Stephen D. Ricks for useful comments.

Common abbreviations for Latter-day Saint works employed in the reviews include CHC for Comprehensive History of the Church, DHC for Documentary History of the Church, JD for Journal of Discourses, and TPJS for Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

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114 See, for instance, the recent use by Robert McKay and Utah Missions, Inc., of Stephen E. Thompson's dismissal of the antiquity of the book of Abraham in The Evangel (November/December 1995): 8. Thompson's unbelief, again, rests to a substantial degree on propositions that would, were not McKay using a double standard, subvert McKay's own religious position.
Editor’s Picks

**** Outstanding, a seminal work of the kind that appears only rarely.

*** Enthusiastically recommended.

** Warmly recommended.

* Recommended.

Arnold K. Garr. *Christopher Columbus: A Latter-day Saint Perspective*. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992. Professor Garr supplies a concise overview of the life of the great explorer, evaluating it from an avowedly Latter-day Saint perspective and using recently published materials by Columbus himself to demonstrate how closely the admiral’s self-understanding matches the portrayal of him in 1 Nephi. ***


Daniel Ludlow. *How to Get the Most from the Book of Mormon* (set of two tapes). Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987. The reviewer of this set of audio tapes felt that, although their three-hour listening time could more profitably be spent with the Book of Mormon itself, they might be useful to some people—especially to those without much prior experience with the Nephite scripture. *

Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds. *The Book of Mormon: Fourth Nephi through Moroni, From Zion to Destruction*. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1995. Published by Brigham Young University’s Religious Studies Center, this is a rather uneven collection of papers presented at a symposium held at the university. *
Clair Poulson. *Samuel, Moroni's Young Warrior* and *Samuel, Gadianton's Foe* (sets of tapes). Salt Lake City: Covenant, 1993, 1994. Our reviewer, though she had some reservations, found this pair of Book of Mormon adventure novels for young adults “imaginative,” “fast-paced,” and “enjoyable.” *

George Reynolds. *Book of Mormon Dictionary*. Salt Lake City: Stemmons, 1988. A reprint of a work originally published in 1888, this dictionary is both useful in itself and valuable in reminding us of the contributions of one of the great early pioneers of serious Book of Mormon study. **

Eldin Ricks. *Eldin Ricks's Thorough Concordance of the LDS Standard Works*. Provo, UT: FARMS, 1995. More portable than most computers, this is almost certainly the best printed concordance to the uniquely Latter-day Saint scriptures, and it won't require you to fire up your microchips every time you want to locate a passage. ***

Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch, eds. *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994. Some readers will no doubt notice a conflict of interest here: This volume is a FARMS publication, and I have a chapter in it. Having now made the requisite full disclosure, I continue to maintain that *The Allegory of the Olive Tree* is a very important book. ****