



2012

Worthy of Another Look: The Historicity of the Book of Mormon

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Oaks, Elder Dallin H. (2012) "Worthy of Another Look: The Historicity of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 21 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol21/iss1/7>

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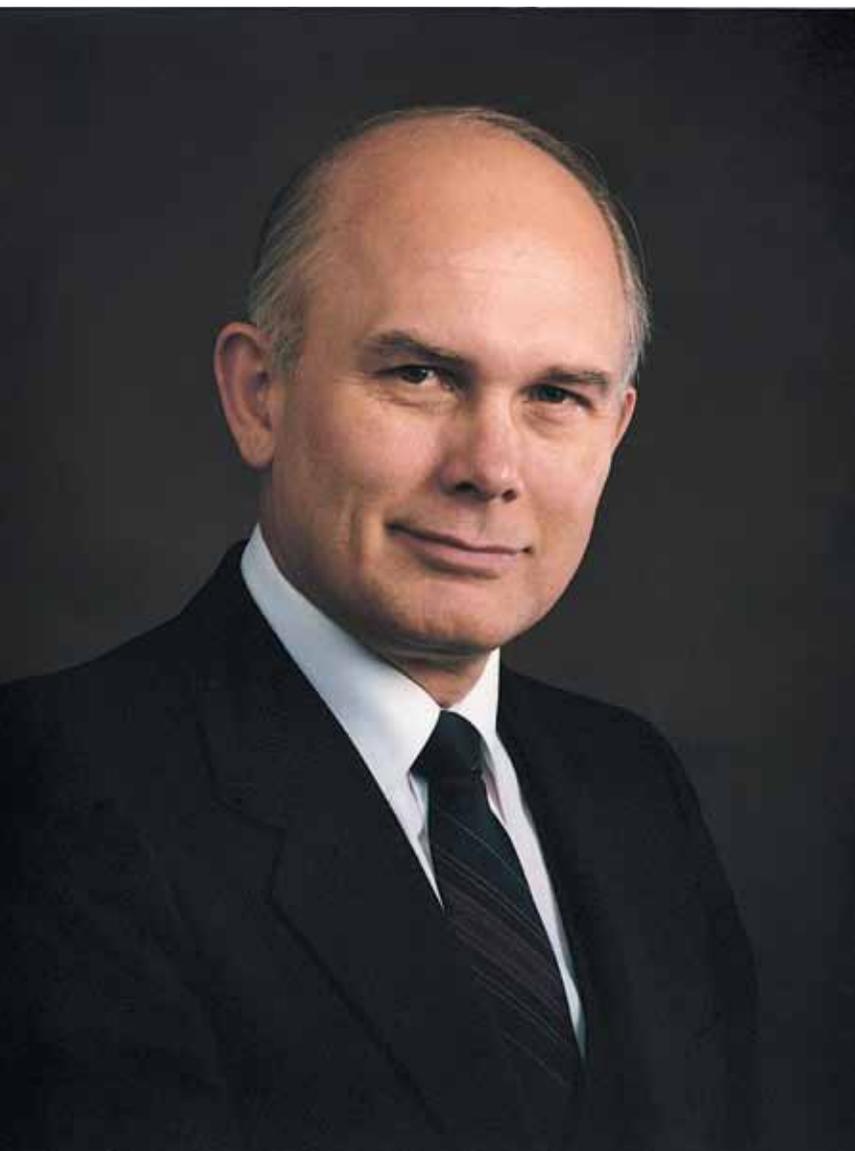
Title Worthy of Another Look: The Historicity of the Book of Mormon

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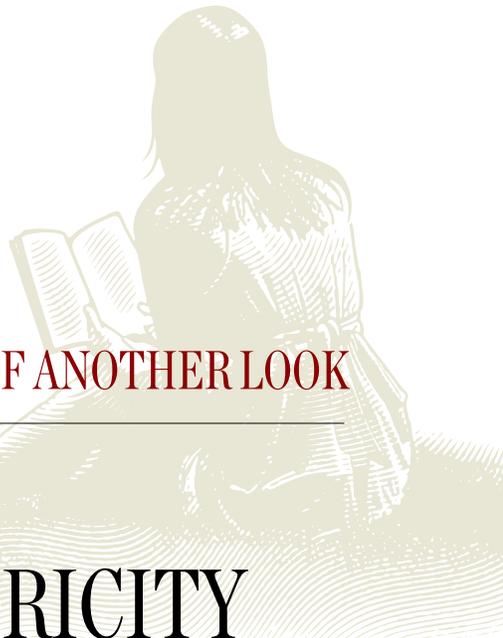
Reference *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21/1 (2012): 66-72.

ISSN 1948-7487 (print), 2167-7565 (online)

Abstract In recent years the idea has been promoted that the Book of Mormon should be viewed as a great moral work but not as the actual history of peoples in the Americas. In this paper, Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles defends the historicity of the Book of Mormon from the standpoint of faith and revelation. He demonstrates that scholarship cannot create faith and that secular evidence will never be able to prove or disprove the Book of Mormon. He also illustrates how the burden of negative proof lies squarely on the shoulders of skeptics, how God values the witness of revelation more than the witness of man, and how historians' methodologies are unable to sufficiently account for the Book of Mormon.



This paper was originally presented 29 October 1993 at the annual dinner of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Provo, Utah, and was published in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 237–48.



WORTHY OF ANOTHER LOOK

THE HISTORICITY OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

ELDER DALLIN H. OAKS

Some who term themselves believing Latter-day Saints are advocating that Latter-day Saints should “abandon claims that [the Book of Mormon] is a historical record of the ancient peoples of the Americas.”¹ They are promoting the feasibility of reading and using the Book of Mormon as nothing more than a pious fiction with some valuable contents. These practitioners of so-called higher criticism raise the question of whether the Book of Mormon, which our prophets have put forward as the preeminent scripture of this dispensation, is fact or fable—history or just a story.

The historicity—historical authenticity—of the Book of Mormon is an issue so fundamental that it rests first upon faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, which is the first principle in this, as in all other matters. However, on the subject of the historicity of the Book of Mormon, there are many subsidiary issues that could each be the subject of a book. It is not my purpose to comment on any of these lesser issues, either those that are said to confirm the Book of Mormon or those that are said to disprove it.

Those lesser issues *are*, however, worthy of attention. Elder Neal A. Maxwell quoted Austin Farrer’s explanation: “Though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What

seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.”²

In these remarks I will seek to use rational argument, but I will not rely on any proofs. I will approach the question of the historicity of the Book of Mormon from the standpoint of faith and revelation. I maintain that the issue of the historicity of the Book of Mormon is basically a difference between those who rely exclusively on scholarship and those who rely on a combination of scholarship, faith, and revelation. Those who rely exclusively on scholarship reject revelation and fulfill Nephi’s prophecy that in the last days men “shall teach with their learning, and deny the Holy Ghost, which giveth utterance” (2 Nephi 28:4). The practitioners of that approach typically focus on a limited number of issues, like geography, horses, angelic delivery, or nineteenth-century language patterns. They ignore or gloss over the incredible complexity of the Book of Mormon record. Those who rely on scholarship, faith, and revelation are willing to look at the entire spectrum of issues—the content as well as the vocabulary, the revelation as well as the excavation.

Speaking for a moment as one whose profession is advocacy, I suggest that if one is willing to acknowledge the importance of faith and the reality of a realm beyond human understanding, the case for the Book of Mormon is the stronger case to argue. The case against the historicity of the Book of Mormon has to prove a negative. You do not prove a negative by prevailing on one debater’s point or by establishing some subsidiary arguments.

For me, this obvious insight goes back over forty years to the first class I took on the Book of Mormon at Brigham Young University. The class

was titled, somewhat boldly, the “Archaeology of the Book of Mormon.” In retrospect, I think it should have been labeled something like “An Anthropologist Looks at a Few Subjects of Interest to Readers of the Book of Mormon.” Here I was introduced to the idea that the Book of Mormon is not a history of all of the people who have lived on the continents of North and South America in all ages of the earth. Up to that time I had assumed that it was. If that were the claim of the Book of Mormon, any piece of historical, archaeological, or linguistic evidence to the contrary would weigh in against the Book of Mormon, and those who rely exclusively on scholarship would have a promising position to argue.

The opponents of historicity must prove that the Book of Mormon has no historical validity for any peoples who lived in the Americas in a particular time frame, a notoriously difficult exercise.

In contrast, if the Book of Mormon only purports to be an account of a few peoples who inhabited a portion of the Americas during a few millennia in the past, the burden of argument changes drastically. It is no longer a question of all versus none; it is a question of some versus none. In other words, in the circumstance I describe, the opponents of historicity must prove that the Book of Mormon has no historical validity for any peoples who lived in the Americas in a particular time frame, a notoriously difficult exercise. One does not prevail on that proposition by proving that a particular Eskimo culture represents migrations from Asia. The opponents of the historicity of the Book of Mormon must

FROM THE EDITOR:

The issue of the historicity of the Book of Mormon highlights the difference between those who rely solely on scholarship and those who rely on scholarship as a complement to revelation and faith. Those who rely on that faithful combination can see and understand the complex issues of the Book of Mormon record and answer the question of the historicity of the Book of Mormon. On the other hand, those who rely solely on scholarship and reject revelation can only focus on a limited number of issues, neither proving nor disproving the authenticity of the Book of Mormon with secular evidence and methods.

prove that the people whose religious life it records did not live anywhere in the Americas.

Another way of explaining the strength of the positive position on the historicity of the Book of Mormon is to point out that we who are its proponents are content with a standoff on this question. Honest investigators will conclude that there are so many evidences that the Book of Mormon is an ancient text that they cannot confidently resolve the question against its authenticity, despite some unanswered questions that seem to support the negative determination. In that circumstance, the proponents of the Book of Mormon can settle for a draw or a hung jury on the question of historicity and take a continuance until the controversy can be retried in another forum.

In fact, it is our position that secular evidence can neither prove nor disprove the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Its authenticity depends, as it says, on a witness of the Holy Spirit. Our side will settle for a draw, but those who deny the historicity of the Book of Mormon cannot settle for a draw. They must try to disprove its historicity—or they seem to feel a necessity to do this—and in this they are unsuccessful because even the secular evidence, viewed in its entirety, is too complex for that.

God invites us to reason with him, but I find it significant that the reasoning to which God invites us is tied to spiritual realities and maturity rather than to scholarly findings or credentials.

Hugh Nibley made a related point when he wrote: “The first rule of historical criticism in dealing with the Book of Mormon or any other ancient text is, never oversimplify. For all its simple and straightforward narrative style, this history is packed as few others are with a staggering wealth of detail that completely escapes the casual reader. . . . Only laziness and vanity lead the student to the early conviction that he has the final answers on what the Book of Mormon contains.”³ Parenthetically, I would cite as an illustration of this point the linguistic, cultural, and writing matters described in

support of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon in Orson Scott Card’s persuasive essay “The Book of Mormon—Artifact or Artifice?”⁴

I admire those scholars for whom scholarship does not exclude faith and revelation. It is part of my faith and experience that the Creator expects us to use the powers of reasoning he has placed within us, and that he also expects us to exercise our divine gift of faith and to cultivate our capacity to be taught by divine revelation. But these things do not come without seeking. Those who utilize scholarship and disparage faith and revelation should ponder the Savior’s question, “How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?” (John 5:44).

God invites us to reason with him, but I find it significant that the reasoning to which God invites us is tied to spiritual realities and maturity rather than to scholarly findings or credentials. In modern revelation the Lord has spoken of reasoning with his people (see D&C 45:10, 15; 50:10–12; 61:13; see also Isaiah 1:18). It is significant that all of these revelations were addressed to persons who had already entered into covenants with the Lord—to the elders of Israel and to the members of his restored church.

In the first of these revelations, the Lord said that he had sent his everlasting covenant into the world to be a light to the world, a standard for his people: “Wherefore, come ye unto it,” he said, “and with him that cometh I will reason as with men in days of old, and I will show unto you my strong reasoning” (D&C 45:10). Thus, this divine offer to reason was addressed to those who had shown faith in God, who had repented of their sins, who had made sacred covenants with the Lord in the waters of baptism, and who had received the Holy Ghost, which testifies of the Father and the Son and leads us into truth. This was the group to whom the Lord offered (and offers) to enlarge their understanding by reason and revelation.

Some Latter-day Saint critics who deny the historicity of the Book of Mormon seek to make their proposed approach persuasive to Latter-day Saints by praising or affirming the value of some of the content of the book. Those who take this approach assume the significant burden of explaining how they can praise the contents of a book they have dismissed as a fable. I have never been able to understand the similar approach in reference to the divinity of the

Savior. As we know, some scholars and some ministers proclaim him to be a great teacher and then have to explain how the one who gave such sublime teachings could proclaim himself (falsely they say) to be the Son of God who would be resurrected from the dead.

The new-style critics have the same problem with the Book of Mormon. For example, we might affirm the value of the teachings recorded in the name of a man named Moroni, but if these teachings have value, how do we explain these statements also attributed to this man? “And if there be faults [in this record] they be the faults of a man. But behold, we know no fault; nevertheless God knoweth all things; therefore, he that condemneth, let him be aware lest he shall be in danger of hell fire” (Mormon 8:17). “And I exhort you to remember these things; for the time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust?” (Moroni 10:27).

There is something strange about accepting the moral or religious content of a book while rejecting the truthfulness of its authors’ declarations, predictions, and statements. This approach not only rejects the concepts of faith and revelation that the Book of Mormon explains and advocates, but it is also not even good scholarship.

Here I cannot resist recalling the words of a valued colleague and friend, now deceased. This famous law professor told a first-year class at the University of Chicago Law School that along with all else, a lawyer must also be a scholar. He continued, “That this has its delights will be recalled to you by the words of the old Jewish scholar: ‘Garbage is garbage; but the *history* of garbage—that’s scholarship.’”⁵ This charming illustration reminds us that scholarship can take what is mundane and make it sublime. So with the history of garbage. But scholarship, so called, can also take what is sublime and make it mundane. Thus, my friend could have illustrated his point by saying, “Miracles are just a fable, but the history of miracles, that’s scholarship.” So with the Book of Mormon. Those who only respect this book as an object of scholarship have a very different perspective than those who revere it as the revealed word of God.

We must not be so committed to scholarship that we close our eyes and ears and hearts to what cannot be demonstrated by scholarship or defended according to physical proofs and intellectual reasoning.

Scholarship and physical proofs are worldly values. I understand their value, and I have had some experience in using them. Such techniques speak to many after the manner of their understanding. But there are other methods and values too, and we must not be so committed to scholarship that we close our eyes and ears and hearts to what cannot be demonstrated by scholarship or defended according to physical proofs and intellectual reasoning.

To cite another illustration, history—even church history—is not reducible to economics or geography or sociology, though each of these disciplines has something to teach on the subject. On the subject of history, President Gordon B. Hinckley commented on the critics who cull out demeaning and belittling information about some of our forebears:

We recognize that our forebears were human. They doubtless made mistakes. . . . But the mistakes were minor, when compared with the marvelous work which they accomplished. To highlight the mistakes and gloss over the greater good is to draw a caricature. Caricatures are amusing, but they are often ugly and dishonest. A man may have a blemish on his cheek and still have a face of beauty and strength, but if the blemish is emphasized unduly in relation to his other features, the portrait is lacking in integrity. . . .

I do not fear truth. I welcome it. But I wish all of my facts in their proper context, with emphasis on those elements which explain the great growth and power of this organization.⁶

In the sixteenth chapter of Matthew, we read how Jesus taught Peter the important contrast between acting upon the witness of the Spirit and acting upon his own reasoning in reliance upon the ways of the world:

When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?

And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.

He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?

And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. . . .

Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ. (Matthew 16:13-17, 20)

That was the Lord's teaching on the value of revelation by the Spirit ("Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona"). In the next three verses of this same

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chapter of Matthew we have the Savior's blunt teaching on the contrasting value of this same apostle's reasoning by worldly values:

From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.

Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.

But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men. (Matthew 16:21-23)

I suggest that we do the same thing and deserve the same rebuke as Peter whenever we subordinate a witness of the Spirit ("the things that be of God") to the work of scholars or the product of our own reasoning by worldly values (the things that "be of men").

Human reasoning cannot place limits on God or dilute the force of divine commandments or revelations. Persons who allow this to happen identify themselves with the unbelieving Nephites who re-

jected the testimony of the prophet Samuel. The Book of Mormon says, "They began to reason and to contend among themselves, saying: That it is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall come" (Helaman 16:17-18). Persons who practice that kind of "reasoning" deny themselves the choice experience someone has described as our heart telling us things that our mind does not know.⁷

Sadly, some Latter-day Saints ridicule others for their reliance on revelation. Such ridicule tends to come from those whose scholarly credentials are high and whose spiritual credentials are low.

The Book of Mormon's major significance is its witness of Jesus Christ as the only begotten Son of God the Eternal Father who redeems and saves us from death and sin. If an account stands as a pre-eminent witness of Jesus Christ, how can it possibly make no difference whether the account is fact or fable—whether the persons really lived who prophesied of Christ and gave eye witnesses of his appearances to them?

Professor John W. Welch pointed out to me that this new wave of antihistoricism "may be a new kid on the block in Salt Lake City, but it has been around in a lot of other Christian neighborhoods for several decades." Indeed! The argument that it makes no difference whether the Book of Mormon is fact or fable is surely a sibling to the argument that it makes no difference whether Jesus Christ ever lived. As we know, there are many so-called Christian teachers who espouse the teachings and deny the teacher. Beyond that, there are those who even deny the existence or the knowability of God. Their counterparts in Mormondom embrace some of the teachings of the Book of Mormon but deny its historicity.

Recently, as I was scanning the magazine *Chronicles*, published by the Rockford Institute, I was stopped by the title of a book review, "Who Needs the Historical Jesus?"⁸ and by the formidable reputation of its author. Jacob Neusner, who is doctor, rabbi, and professor, reviewed two books whose titles both include the phrase "the historical Jesus." His comments are persuasive on the subject of historicity in general.

Neusner praises these two books, one as "an intensively powerful and poetic book . . . by a great writer who is also an original and weighty scholar"⁹ and the other as "a masterpiece of scholarship."¹⁰ But notwithstanding his tributes to their technique,

Neusner forthrightly challenges the appropriateness of the effort the authors have undertaken. Their effort, typical in today's scholarly world, was to use a skeptical reading of the scriptures rather than a believing one to present a historical study that would "distinguish fact from fiction, myth or legend from authentic event." In doing so, their "skeptical reading of the Gospels"¹¹ caused them to assume that the Jesus Christ of the Gospels was not the Jesus who actually lived. It also caused them to assume that historians can know the difference.

I now quote Neusner's conclusions:

No historical work explains itself so disingenuously as does work on the historical Jesus: from beginning, middle, to end, the issue is theological.¹²

Surely no question bears more profound theological implications for Christians than what the person they believe to be the incarnate God really, actually, truly said and did here on earth. But historical method, which knows nothing of the supernatural and looks upon miracles with unreserved stupefaction, presumes to answer them.¹³

But statements (historical or otherwise) about the founders of religions present a truth of a different kind. Such statements not only bear weightier implications, but they appeal to sources distinct from the kind that record what George Washington did on a certain day in 1775. They are based upon revelation, not mere information; they claim, and those who value them believe, that they originate in God's revelation or inspiration. Asking the Gospels to give historical rather than gospel truth confuses theological truth with historical fact, diminishing them to the measurements of this world, treating Jesus as precisely the opposite of what Christianity has always known him to be, which is unique.

When we speak of "the historical Jesus," therefore, we dissect a sacred subject with a secular scalpel, and in the confusion of categories of truth the patient dies on the operating table; the surgeons forget why they made their cut; they remove the heart and neglect to put it back. The statement "One and one are two," or "The Constitutional Convention met in 1787," is simply not of the same order as "Moses received the Torah at Sinai" or "Jesus Christ is Son of God."

What historical evidence can tell us whether someone really rose from the dead, or what God said to the prophet on Sinai? I cannot identify a historical method equal to the work of verifying the claim that God's Son was born to a virgin girl. And how can historians accustomed to explaining the causes of the Civil War speak of miracles, or men rising from the dead, and of other matters of broad belief? Historians working with miracle stories turn out

something that is either paraphrastic of the faith, indifferent to it, or merely silly. In their work we have nothing other than theology masquerading as "critical history." If I were a Christian, I would ask why the crown of science has now to be placed upon the head of a Jesus reduced to this-worldly dimensions, adding that here is just another crown of thorns. In my own view as a rabbi, I say only that these books are simply and monumentally irrelevant.¹⁴

A scholarly expert is a specialist in a particular discipline. By definition, he knows everything or almost everything about a very narrow field of human experience.

Please excuse me for burdening you with that long quote, but I hope you will agree with my conclusion that what the rabbi/professor said about the historical Jesus is just as appropriate and persuasive on the question of the historicity of the Book of Mormon.¹⁵

To put the matter briefly, a scholarly expert is a specialist in a particular discipline. By definition, he knows everything or almost everything about a very narrow field of human experience. To think that he can tell us something about other scholarly disciplines, let alone about God's purposes and the eternal scheme of things, is naïve at best.

Good scholars understand the limitations of their own fields, and their conclusions are carefully limited to the areas of their expertise. In connection with this, I remember the reported observation of an old lawyer. As they traveled through a pastoral setting with cows grazing on green meadows, an acquaintance said, "Look at those spotted cows." The cautious lawyer observed carefully and conceded, "Yes, those cows are spotted, at least on this side." I wish that all of the critics of the Book of Mormon, including those who feel compelled to question its historicity, were even half that cautious about their "scholarly" conclusions.

In this message I have offered some thoughts on matters relating to the historicity of the Book of Mormon.

1. On this subject, as on so many others involving our faith and theology, it is important to rely on faith and revelation as well as scholarship.

2. I am convinced that secular evidence can neither prove nor disprove the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

3. Those who deny the historicity of the Book of Mormon have the difficult task of trying to prove a negative. They also have the awkward duty of explaining how they can dismiss the Book of Mormon as a fable while still praising some of its contents.

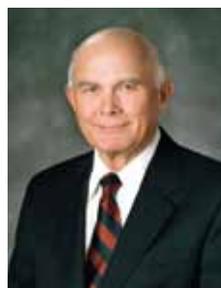
4. We know from the Bible that Jesus taught his apostles that in the important matter of his own identity and mission they were blessed for relying on the witness of revelation (“the things that be of God”), and it is offensive to him for them to act upon worldly values and reasoning (“the things . . . that be of men”) (Matthew 16:23).

5. Those scholars who rely on faith and revelation as well as scholarship, and who assume the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, must endure ridicule from those who disdain these things of God.

6. I have also illustrated that not all scholars disdain the value of religious belief and the legitimacy

of the supernatural when applied to theological truth. Some even criticize the “intellectual provincialism” of those who apply the methods of historical criticism to the Book of Mormon.

I testify of Jesus Christ, whom we serve, whose church this is. I invoke his blessings upon you, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■



Elder Dallin H. Oaks, member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since 1984, previously served as a professor of law at the University of Chicago Law School, as president of Brigham Young University, and as a justice of the Utah Supreme Court. He presided over the Philippines area of the Church between 2002 and 2004.

NOTES

The valuable suggestions of Professor John W. Welch, J. Reuben Clark Law School at Brigham Young University, are gratefully acknowledged.

1. Anthony A. Hutchinson, “The Word of God Is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-Century Scripture,” in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Exploration in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 1.
2. Austin Farrer, “The Christian Apologist,” in *Light on C. S. Lewis*, ed. Jocelyn Gibb (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), 26.

3. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 237.
4. Orson Scott Card, *A Storyteller in Zion: Essays and Speeches by Orson Scott Card* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993), 13–45.
5. Paul M. Bator, “Talk to the First Year Class,” *The Law School Record* 35 (Spring 1989): 7.
6. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 1983, 68.
7. Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 92.
8. Jacob Neusner, “Who Needs the Historical Jesus?,” review of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, by John P. Meier,

and *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, by John Dominic Crossan, *Chronicles*, July 1993, 32–34.

9. Neusner, “Who Needs the Historical Jesus?,” 34.
10. Neusner, “Who Needs the Historical Jesus?,” 33.
11. Neusner, “Who Needs the Historical Jesus?,” 32.
12. Neusner, “Who Needs the Historical Jesus?,” 34.
13. Neusner, “Who Needs the Historical Jesus?,” 32.
14. Neusner, “Who Needs the Historical Jesus?,” 32–33.
15. Neusner apparently agrees. See his letter to the editor in *Sunstone*, July 1993, 7–8.