



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 16 | Number 2

Article 9

6-1-2004

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Sorensen, A. Don (2004) "The Problem of the Sermon on the Mount and 3 Nephi," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 16 : No. 2 , Article 9.

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FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title The Problem of the Sermon on the Mount and 3 Nephi

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Reference *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 117-48.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Review of “A Further Inquiry into the Historicity of the Book of Mormon” (1982), by William D. Russell.

THE PROBLEM OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT AND 3 NEPHI

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One often finds that those who challenge the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon try to create the impression that they are making a scholarly, carefully reasoned case against the book. They openly and confidently describe themselves as taking “historical scholarship seriously” (pp. 25–26), while accusing those who allegedly do not take them seriously of placing feeling over evidence, “spirit over science, and faith over history.”¹ But this impression that opponents of the Book of Mormon try to create is false. As measured by contemporary standards of scholarship, recent attacks on the Book of Mormon as an ancient document often are characterized by poor logic and methodology.² What is more, the authors of these attacks seem unaware of the magnitude of the problems they face in their attempts to undermine

This paper was delivered on 11 May 1984 at the Mormon History Association meeting in Provo, Utah.

1. George D. Smith, “Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon,” *Free Inquiry* 4/1 (1983): 27; reprinted in *On the Barricades: Religion and Free Inquiry in Conflict*, ed. Robert Basil, Mary Beth Gehrman, and Tim Madigan (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), 137–56 (quotation on p. 147).

2. References to *recent* events or matters happening *today* have not been updated.

Review of William D. Russell. “A Further Inquiry into the Historicity of the Book of Mormon.” *Sunstone*, September–October 1982, 20–27.

the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon—even if they do reason well.³

In this paper I examine a typical example of the logic opponents of the Book of Mormon use when they deny its validity as an ancient text. However, I will not just illustrate that such reasoning is shoddy. It is even more important to examine some deeper issues that divide those who challenge the Book of Mormon from those who defend it, even if the former were to improve the cogency of their attack. Accordingly, I will ultimately abandon Russell's defective arguments for better ones from Bible scholarship in order to clarify these deeper issues.

The argument I use for purposes of illustration is made by William Russell in a recent article in *Sunstone*, in which he claims that the inclusion of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi is good evidence that the Book of Mormon is not an ancient document. My reasons for choosing an article by Russell are that he is comparatively well known as an in-house opponent of the Book of Mormon, and his arguments against the historical authenticity of the book are typical of the kind of defective reasoning many opponents use. The argument over the appearance of the sermon in 3 Nephi is the most carefully made argument in the whole paper, so I chose that particular one for careful attention. Russell's other points against the Book of Mormon are little more than bald assertions, or his reasoning in support of them is truncated and obscure. The secondary sources Russell cites in support of his claims are at best second rate. Many of his references are to opponents of the Book of Mormon whose reasoning, like Russell's, is seriously defective. Russell does cite several Bible scholars

3. Examples of recent articles and books whose arguments are often not well articulated include Wayne Ham, "Problems in Interpreting the Book of Mormon as History," *Courage* 1 (September 1970): 15–22; Vernal Holley, *Book of Mormon Authorship: A Closer Look* (Ogden, UT: Zenos, 1983); Susan Curtis Mernitz, "Palmyra Revisited: A Look at Early Nineteenth Century America and the Book of Mormon," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 2 (1982): 30–37; George D. Smith Jr., "Defending the Keystone: Book of Mormon Difficulties," *Sunstone*, May–June 1981, 45–54; and Smith, "Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon."

in support of his position. I will take references of this kind seriously as the analysis proceeds.

Russell's Reasoning

To show more clearly the problems with Russell's reasoning and to facilitate constant reference to the several parts of that reasoning throughout the paper, I will lay his arguments out plainly. The central claim of his argument concerning the inclusion of Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi goes like this: "We are led to the likely conclusion that the Book of Mormon should not be regarded as a historical account of ancient people who inhabited the Americas" (p. 25) because the "inclusion of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount in III Nephi" does not square "with what has been discovered about particular events and ideas described in the Bible" (p. 24). For easy reference, let me make explicit two premises contained in this claim.

1. We have good reason to doubt the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon if it does not square with what has been discovered about particular events and ideas described in the Bible.

2. The inclusion of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi does not square with what has been discovered about particular events and ideas described in the Bible.

How does Russell support these premises? Again, for the sake of clarity and easy reference, I list and number the reasons he gives in support of the above argument (numbered R1, etc.). The organization of the reasons represents how they are meant to fit together.

- R1. The Gospel of Matthew was not written until forty to seventy years after the crucifixion of Jesus and hence had not been written at the time Jesus visited the New World.

- R2. How Matthew's gospel was written makes it improbable that Christ would have delivered Matthew's version of the sermon in the New World.

- Ra. Before any of the synoptic Gospels were composed, their parts existed as independent units.

- Rb. Before the traditions of Jesus were written down, they circulated orally.
- Rc. The *Sitz im Leben* of the early Christians necessarily helped determine the selection, formation, and transmission of these traditions. The author(s) of each synoptic Gospel composed his own account from these sources.
- Rd. Mark was written first, and Matthew and Luke used Mark as a major source and added other materials from a second source called Q.
- Re. The selection, organization, and chronology of Matthew's account reflect his dissatisfactions with Mark's account as well as his individual purposes for writing a new gospel.
- Ri. Matthew's dissatisfactions with Mark are that Jesus is too human in Mark and that the disciples are portrayed by Mark in too negative a light. Accordingly, Matthew heightens the miraculous in his story of Jesus and alters or omits offending statements about the disciples.
- Rii. Matthew's individual purpose in writing another gospel is to portray Jesus as a new Moses, a giver of a new law that both fulfills Mosaic law and is superior to it. The sermon is the first of five blocks of teaching material reminiscent of Moses's five books of the law. Part of Matthew's intent in presenting Jesus as a new Moses may have been to avoid the implied libertinism of Paul's writing without revalidating the law of Moses.
- R3. The sermon appears in Luke but in separate parts and in a different setting, i.e., in a "plain" rather than on a "mount."

What I will now show is that Russell's central claim and the reasons given in support of it both are seriously defective logically and cannot be fairly described as "what has been discovered about . . . the Bible."

To begin with, many of Russell's reasons, when considered singly, are logically irrelevant to his central claim. That the author(s) of Matthew heightens the miraculous and corrects Mark's somewhat negative view of the disciples and his too human view of Jesus seems irrelevant, since the sermon itself does not heighten the miraculous or present a more favorable picture of Jesus and his disciples (Ri). That Mark was written first and that Matthew used Mark and Q seem irrelevant since the sermon might have been part of Q (Rd). It does not follow that parts of the sermon existed independently simply because parts of Matthew existed independently before it was written (Ra). And that Matthew was not written until after AD 70 does not mean that the sermon was not composed until after AD 70 (R1). Furthermore, that Matthew portrays Jesus as the new Moses provides questionable support for Russell's argument, given that, according to some Jewish traditions, the Messiah was expected to bring a New Torah or to make all the words of the Torah clear (Rii).⁴ If Jesus gave the sermon as recorded in Matthew, it would fulfill nicely the expectations of this tradition.

But even if Russell's reasons individually supported his claim that the Book of Mormon is not a historically authentic document, the majority of those reasons cannot be accurately described as what has been discovered about the Bible. That Matthew was not written until after AD 70 has been recently and powerfully challenged. After carefully considering the dating of the New Testament, John A. T. Robinson concludes by observing "how *little* evidence there is for the dating of *any* of the New Testament writings." The "consensus of the textbooks" on this matter, he continues, rests upon "much slighter foundations" than the beginning student probably supposes.⁵ Robinson himself thinks that all the books of the New Testament were written before AD 70. Even more controversial is the two-source hypothesis—that

4. W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 183–90.

5. John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), 336, 337; see William H. Brownlee, "Whence the Gospel According to John?" in *John and Qumran*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (London: Chapman, 1972), 166–94; and E. Earle Ellis, "Dating the New Testament," *New Testament Studies* 26 (1980): 487–502.

Matthew and Luke used Mark and Q in composing their Gospels. In recent years, this hypothesis has come under severe criticism and is now very much an unsettled matter.⁶

Russell thinks that the parallels between Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and Luke's Sermon on the Plain indicate that Matthew composed the sermon. Some New Testament scholars agree. In the words of G. B. Caird: "Luke's Sermon is the counterpart of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. . . . The common material was drawn from Q. But Matthew has combined the Q sermon with excerpts from other parts of Q."⁷ But other scholars think differently. G. H. P. Thompson thinks that the "relation between the Matthaean and Lucan beatitudes is not easy to determine, and it is possible that Jesus gave them in different forms on different occasions."⁸ John Drury believes that Luke used Matthew as his source for the Sermon on the Plain and contends that the two-source hypothesis is a "theory which has benefited too much from a one-sided distribution of scholarly labour, neglecting the 'simpler, competing possibility' that Luke used Matthew."⁹ Of these three views, only Caird's is favorable to Russell's claim against the Book of Mormon.

6. See, for example, William R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Macmillan, 1964); Farmer, "Modern Developments of Griesbach's Hypothesis," *New Testament Studies* 23 (1976): 275–95; Bernard Orchard, *Matthew, Luke and Mark* (Manchester: Koinonia, 1976); David L. Dungan, "Mark—The Abridgement of Matthew and Luke," in *Jesus and Man's Hope* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1970), 1:51–97; Thomas R. W. Longstaff, *Evidence of Conflation in Mark? A Study in the Synoptic Problem* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977); Malcolm Lowe, "The Demise of Arguments from Order for Marcan Priority," *Novum Testamentum* 24 (1982): 27–36; John M. Rist, *On the Independence of Matthew and Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Hans-Herbert Stoldt, *History and Criticism of the Marcan Hypothesis*, trans. Donald L. Niewyk (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1980). I wonder what Russell would make of *Pistis Sophia* 1:43, in *Pistis Sophia: A Gnostic Miscellany*, ed. G. R. S. Mead, rev. ed. (London: Watkins, 1921), 58–61.

7. G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), 101.

8. G. H. P. Thompson, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 111.

9. John Drury, *Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel: A Study in Early Christian Historiography* (Atlanta: Knox, 1976), 120, quoting James H. Ropes, *The Synoptic Gospels* (1934; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 93.

Let us look at the reasons Russell offers that I have not yet criticized. These reasons promise to be more relevant than the others, and it is possible that, if they hold up, they will not only support Russell's position but will unify and revive the reasons I have already criticized so that they, too, support his position. Before Matthew was written, Russell tells us, the traditions of Jesus circulated orally as independent units, and the *Sitz im Leben* of the early church necessarily helped determine the selection, formation, and transmission of these traditions (Ra-c). Russell leads his readers to believe that this is what has actually been *discovered* about the Bible.

What is the status of this view of how the traditions of Jesus developed according to New Testament scholarship? New Testament scholars actually recognize two opposing views of how the traditions of Jesus developed, both of which have highly respected advocates. A well-known scholar on this subject describes these two views as follows:

On the one extreme is to be found the view that Christian tradition was largely created and shaped to fit the needs of the expanding Church. We have here and there the words of Jesus, or at least primitive Palestinian sayings, but even these few words have frequently been put into new contexts and given new meanings. . . . On the other extreme is to be found the view that the Synoptic tradition is comprised of material which has been carefully and literally handed down by trained transmitters. The tradition was originated by Jesus himself, who taught it to his disciples, who in turn supervised its transmission to insure the accuracy of the tradition. . . . [Those who hold this view] grant a certain amount of flexibility to the tradition.¹⁰

Borrowing terms from M. Eugene Boring's book, *Sayings of the Risen Jesus*, I refer to the first view as the fluid-tradition theory and to

10. E. P. Sanders, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 281.

the second view as the controlled-tradition theory.¹¹ Of course there are variations of both theories, as well as gradations between them, but the general distinction between the two views is widely recognized and respected among New Testament scholars and is useful for our purposes.

In his argument against the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon, Russell assumes the fluid-tradition theory. The principal reasons he offers in support of that argument present the main hypotheses of that theory. Those hypotheses are that an oral period existed before any of the gospel material was written down, that the gospel material circulated as independent units during the oral period, and that the *Sitz im Leben* of the early church was the sociological determinant in the selection, formation, and transmission of the separate units (Ra-c). Furthermore, the two-source hypothesis (Rd)—that Matthew and Luke used Mark and Q in writing their gospels—has been a favored hypothesis of the fluid-tradition theory since Rudolf Bultmann expressly adopted it as an essential assumption in his attempt to “fill the vacuum between . . . ‘the disciples’ experience of Jesus’ and ‘the writing down of this experience.’”¹²

According to the controlled-tradition theory,¹³ Jesus and his followers belonged to a culture with a tradition, deeply rooted, of preserving sacred texts in word-perfect form. What is more, the early church’s Christ tradition was “on a higher plane than the Rabbis’ Oral Torah. The crux of the matter is that Jesus’ followers did not regard him as a teacher among other teachers, but as the Messiah, the Ebed

11. M. Eugene Boring, *Sayings of the Risen Jesus: Christian Prophecy in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 1–2.

12. As noted in Stoldt, *Marcan Hypothesis*, 239.

13. The best known works are Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, trans. Eric J. Sharpe (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961); Gerhardsson, *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (Lund: Gleerup, 1964); Gerhardsson, *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); Harald Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition*, trans. E. Margaret Rowley and Robert A. Kraft (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970). On “note taking,” see George Kennedy, “Classical and Christian Source Criticism,” in *The Relationships among the Gospels: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, ed. William O. Walker Jr. (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1978), 125–55.

Jahwe, the Son of God."¹⁴ In the words of a well-known proponent of the controlled-tradition view: "It therefore becomes necessary, when trying to determine the nature and extent of the early Church's creative contribution to the shaping of the tradition of Christ, to take account of the fact that the early Church regarded Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the 'only' teacher, and therefore had special cause to note, gather and keep what *he* said and did—he and no other."¹⁵

So we see that the controlled-tradition theory places much more emphasis on Jesus himself as the source of the Jesus traditions and less on the *Sitz im Leben* as the determinant of those traditions. Furthermore, the method of transmission was partly written in the form of notebooks and private scrolls and was partly oral in the form of memorized sayings kept alive by continual repetition of them. Interpretive adaptations occurred in the process of transmission, and the transmission clarified and completed the tradition; but the tradition was not created by the Christian community and was marked by fixity and continuity.¹⁶

What is the status of the controlled-tradition and fluid-tradition theories among New Testament scholars today? Well, there is a wide range of opinion, the majority of scholars leaning toward the fluid-tradition theory. But proponents of the controlled-tradition theory believe that much remains unsettled. At the end of a carefully researched and widely recognized work, E. P. Sanders reaches two conclusions of special interest to us. First, concerning the precanonical tradition, he concludes, "Just what the method of transmission in Christianity was remains an open question."¹⁷ Second, concerning the synoptic problem—the issue of the literary relationship among the three synoptic Gospels—he concludes, "The evidence does not seem to warrant the degree of certainty with which many scholars hold the two-document hypothesis."¹⁸ In his professional judgment, Sanders thinks that the

14. Gerhardsson, *Tradition*, 41.

15. *Ibid.*, 44.

16. Gerhardsson, *Origins*, 46, 53, 60, 68, 75, 77, 85.

17. Sanders, *Tendencies*, 296.

18. *Ibid.*, 278, emphasis deleted.

“entire study of the Synoptic Gospels would profit from a period of withholding judgements on the Synoptic problem while the evidence is resifted.”¹⁹

Since Sanders wrote these words, things have, if anything, deteriorated further. Even scholars who hold to some version of the fluid-tradition theory acknowledge that matters are unsettled. In a recent article in defense of the two-source hypothesis, one author tells us, “At the Pittsburgh Festival on the Gospels (1970), J. A. Fitzmyer noted that the ‘history of Synoptic research reveals that the [Synoptic] problem is practically insoluble.’ Modern trends seem to bear out that judgment. While it is certainly true that the majority of New Testament scholars still presuppose the Two Source hypothesis, that consensus seems less certain today.”²⁰

Another student of the New Testament, Eugene Boring, admits that “there is presently no consensus about the nature of the traditioning process.”²¹ There is no point in lengthening the list of quotations. The fact is that the fluid-tradition theory is not the well-established view that Russell wants his readers to think it is.

Let us return again to Russell’s argument against the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. What we now notice is that the first premise of that argument is seriously misleading. That premise reads: We have good reason to doubt the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon if it does not square with what has been discovered about particular events and ideas described in the Bible. But now we see that the first premise should actually read: We have good reason to doubt the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon if it does not square with the fluid-tradition theory about the early tradition of Jesus. Once Russell’s first premise is accurately described, we see that the principal reasons for accepting it turn out to be nothing more than a restatement of the first premise itself. In other words, the separate-

19. Ibid., 279.

20. Gordon D. Fee, “A Text-Critical Look at the Synoptic Problem,” *Novum Testamentum* 22 (1980): 12, quoting Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Priority of Mark and the ‘Q’ Source in Luke,” in *Jesus and Man’s Hope* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1970), 1:132. For a refutation of Fee, see Lowe, “Demise,” 27–36.

21. Boring, *Sayings*, 10.

unit assumption (Ra), the oral-tradition assumption (Rb), the *Sitz im Leben* assumption (Rc), and the two-source hypothesis (Rd) are simply parts of the fluid-tradition theory. Russell does not offer reasoned support for this theory, nor does he mention that there exists an alternative theory accepted by reputable New Testament scholars.

Of course, it makes a difference whether the controlled-tradition theory or the fluid-tradition theory is used as a test of the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. By assuming that the fluid-tradition theory is the test the Book of Mormon must pass, Russell begs the question. In other words, Russell simply assumes the fluid-tradition theory as a critical test of the Book of Mormon's authenticity, when the crucial question at hand is whether a fluid-tradition theory or a controlled-tradition theory—or a modified version of the controlled-tradition theory—is true.

In conclusion, Russell tries to create the impression that the Book of Mormon is not an ancient document because it does not square with what has been discovered about the New Testament. But his reasoning is fallacious. Considered separately, many of his reasons are simply irrelevant. If the fluid-tradition theory is not assumed to be true, then the reasons I first critiqued remain unsupportive of his claim. Even if the fluid-tradition theory is assumed to be true and was made to support Russell's claim, he begs an important question. At no point in presenting his case does Russell alert his readers to views that oppose his own—views held by recognized scholars of the New Testament.

The Fluid-Tradition Theory and Begging the Question

The time has come to move beyond a critique of Russell's best argument. My purpose is to see how deep the question-begging goes when the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon is challenged on the grounds that Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is included in 3 Nephi. According to the fluid-tradition theory of the origin of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, separate parts of the sermon circulated orally, and the *Sitz im Leben* of the early church helped determine the selection, formation, and transmission of those separate parts, as well as the final composition of the sermon by Matthew. According

to the Book of Mormon, a version of the controlled-tradition theory is true. In this version, Jesus was deeply aware of his divine nature and mission and the importance of preserving his saving word. Some of his sayings, including the Sermon on the Mount, were kept by his followers under strict command from him. It is not possible here to examine thoroughly an account of the origin of the sermon by the fluid-tradition theory. The most that can be done is to illustrate how such an account begs the question, even when presented in a scholarly way. Beginning with a basic methodological assumption, I will trace logically the steps in a fluid-tradition account of the origins of the sermon, which is inconsistent with the inclusion of the sermon in 3 Nephi, and, in doing so, show why that account is seriously begging the question.

Everyone agrees that we never approach the human past with an empty head. We always see the past in light of a background theory or preunderstanding that we never fully explicate. Among the basic assumptions of any background theory are criteria about what counts as historical reality and what type of hypothesis about the past is likely to be true before supporting it with evidence. From these assumptions methodological imperatives are formed that guide the doing of history. I have chosen one such imperative—the most obvious and relevant one I can think of—that determines the plausibility of a hypothesis about the sacred past before the evidence is in and that is one that most modern historians accept.

Modern historians usually assume that references to supernatural beings and events must be systematically excluded from historical explanations of the sacred past. Or, to put this methodological imperative positively, only naturalistic assumptions of reality and categories of interpretation ought to be used in doing history, including the history of sacred things. One reason for adopting this imperative is skepticism, deeply rooted in modern scholarship, regarding divine realities. But another reason is that even if an individual believes in the supernatural, it is commonly thought that he or she cannot make assumptions about divine reality or employ supernatural categories of interpretation when that person fashions history, for to do so would

be to give up the principle of natural cause and effect in history and to introduce the irrational into historical research. One author writes about using supernatural explanations: "This procedure would put an end to historical method, since historical method, like scientific method, must proceed on the basis of natural causation. To accept the supernatural would mean giving up the usual methods of establishing historical probability and leave no firm basis for historical investigation, since no grounds would exist for preferring one account of an event to another."²²

Before tracing the logical effects of the methodological imperative of naturalism, I need to make one more commonplace observation. It is that a favored form of explanation among historians is sociocultural environment. Russell's reference to the *Sitz im Leben* of the early church in accounting for the early traditions of Jesus is an explanation of this type.

What kind of hypothesis will have a high prior plausibility for the modern historian in accounting for the books of the New Testament? For the historian true to his method, the answer is very obvious: those hypotheses that account for New Testament texts in naturalistic and environmental terms. Hypotheses using supernatural categories will have little, if any, prior plausibility. Of course, the New Testament texts themselves contain an interpretation of the past that includes assumptions of divine reality. So the task of the modern historian is to explain this primary source, including its assumptions of divine reality, in naturalistic environmental terms. He has no choice if he is true to his method.

Consider next how the authors of the four Gospels and Acts together classify the sayings of Jesus. According to these authors, Jesus said some things before his crucifixion and other things after his resurrection but before his ascension, and then spoke to or through prophets after his ascension. This classification of the sayings of Jesus rests on descriptions of encounters with divine reality—seeing and

22. I. Howard Marshall, "Historical Criticism," in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), 129.

hearing the risen Lord, watching him ascend into heaven, having his word revealed after the ascension. But a historian whose account of the sayings of Jesus obeys the naturalistic imperative cannot accept the authors' classification in explaining the formation, selection, and transmission of those sayings because it is based on assumptions of divine reality. The historian must devise a classification system based on an environmental explanation. The result is that the sayings of Jesus—already classified by New Testament authors—must be reclassified. The historian, armed with a naturalistic classification, must see behind the classification made by the authors of the sacred texts in order to explain naturalistically how the traditions of Jesus developed.

Accordingly, in order to reclassify the sayings of Jesus in the four Gospels, those sayings that were spoken by Jesus after his resurrection and before his ascension cannot be attributed to the historical Jesus, unless, of course, his death is denied. These postresurrection and preascension sayings must be viewed as either words spoken by Jesus before his death or not the actual sayings of the earthly Jesus. The only other alternative is to ignore these sayings, to refuse to offer a naturalistic account of them, because they presume supernatural reality.

Consider, for example, a naturalistic account of Matthew 28:18–20, which reports the last words recorded in Matthew of the resurrected Christ before his ascension. How should these words be accounted for? A recent work on the sayings of the risen Jesus will illustrate my point: “Did the saying [Matthew 28:18–20] originate as the oracle of a Christian prophet in the strict sense, or is it a literary composition of Matthew or one of his predecessors, or some combination of the two?”²³ The possibility that the last words recorded in Matthew were actually spoken by the resurrected Lord, as Matthew claims, is not considered.

In historical research, the role of a classification system is to help describe and explain past events. Typically, the natural categories of the system are used to account for past events in terms of sociocultural environment. In the case of the sayings of Jesus, this means showing

23. Boring, *Sayings*, 204.

how his words developed linearly or dialectically in relation to a certain *Sitz im Leben*. Once this view is taken, the question must be asked Which, if any, of the sayings of the Lord are actually the words of the earthly Jesus? The methodological assumption that the past is best understood in naturalistic and *Sitz im Leben* terms places high prior plausibility on hypotheses that show the words of Jesus evolving during and particularly after his short ministry and low or no prior plausibility on hypotheses that show his words as established doctrines taught by a divine being who was concerned with their preservation. Now the texts of the New Testament, for hermeneutical reasons I cannot enter into here, are vulnerable to naturalistic interpretations. Given this fact, the high prior plausibility of naturalistic hypotheses makes it quite probable that some, perhaps very many, of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels will be seen as products of the post-Easter situation of the early church.

What I have said can be illustrated from New Testament scholarship. By way of background, first consider a statement by Bultmann that has furnished

the rationale for one of the most important methodological principles underlying the development and use of form criticism in historical Jesus and Synoptic Gospel research for nearly fifty years. . . .

“The Church drew no distinction between such utterances by Christian prophets (ascribed to the ascended Christ) and the sayings of Jesus in the tradition, for the reason that even the dominical sayings in the tradition were not the pronouncements of a past authority, but sayings of the risen Lord, who is always a contemporary for the Church.”²⁴

What this statement means is “not only that all Synoptic logia have their primary *Sitz im Leben* within the enthusiasm of the earliest

24. James D. G. Dunn, “Prophetic ‘I’ Sayings and the Jesus Tradition: The Importance of Testing Prophetic Utterances within Early Christianity,” *New Testament Studies* 24 (1978): 175, quoting Rudolf K. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 127–28.

communities, but also that there is no *a priori* reason for taking any logion in particular as a word of the earthly Jesus.” Every such claim must be established “by an examination of form and content.”²⁵ What did followers of Bultmann conclude about the sayings of Jesus? Among other things: “According to the theory of an authentic oral tradition, the flow of tradition was from the earthly Jesus to his disciples to the apostles in the church. Actually, the flow was in the opposite direction: from the apostles in the church to the earthly Jesus.”²⁶ This conclusion, which represents an extreme version of the fluid-tradition theory, seems to contradict an essential ingredient in the story of Jesus, Son of God, told by the New Testament.

With this background, I turn to a very recent example in the tradition Bultmann helped establish of how a naturalistic interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount works. I want to show how a naturalistic classification of the sayings of Jesus that is part of a *Sitz im Leben* hypothesis is used to account for parts of the sermon. The example comes from a recent book by Boring about the sayings of the synoptic tradition.²⁷

The basic distinction in Boring’s book is between the “historical” and the “prophetic” sayings of Jesus. By “historical sayings” he does not mean a “verbatim report” of what the earthly Jesus said but how his words are “represented” by the synoptic authors. Thus, what Boring calls historical sayings may have been “subject to additions or modifications in the course of the traditioning process or conceivably may have been created from whole cloth.” The second class of sayings are called “prophetic” because “they are presented in the community not as what Jesus of Nazareth once *said* but as what the post-Easter exalted Lord now *says*” through his prophets. As in the case of historical sayings, prophetic sayings are called prophetic because they are *represented* as the words of the risen Lord through prophets, not because they necessarily *are* the words of the existing heavenly Lord.²⁸

25. Dunn, “Prophetic ‘I’ Sayings,” 175.

26. *Ibid.*, 176, quoting Howard M. Teeple, “The Oral Tradition That Never Existed,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1970): 67.

27. Boring, *Sayings*, 1–14, 137–41.

28. *Ibid.*, 1.

Boring presents complex material and formal criteria for what counts as prophetic sayings. The material criteria of prophetic speech include apocalyptic references, eschatological *paraclesis*, rebuke of immorality and pronouncement of proleptic judgment of the Last Day, references to persecution and suffering, the revelation of the secrets of men's hearts, a concern for false prophets, concrete directions for church life, wisdom motifs, and historical predictions. Among the formal characteristics of prophetic sayings are a legal style, eschatological fervor, the pairing of *lex talionis* and *chiasmus*, and unconditional pronouncement of curse and blessing.²⁹

It is easy to anticipate how Boring's distinction between historical and prophetic speech will affect the classification of the words of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels. First of all, the postresurrection and preascension words of Jesus must be interpreted as either historical or prophetic sayings. Accordingly, Boring interprets Matthew 28:18–20 as a prophetic saying—a saying of the risen Lord through his prophets—and not as the words of the resurrected Jesus standing before his apostles.³⁰ Second, many of the remaining sayings attributed by the synoptic authors to the historical Jesus must also be reclassified as prophetic speech. For if this is not done, then Boring's class of historical sayings would subsume all instances of his class of prophetic sayings; the two classes of sayings would fail to be extensionally distinct. Boring is definitely not interested in distinguishing between historical words of the Lord—the prophetic and the nonprophetic (in the sense of foretelling the future or not). He wants his classification system, which is basic to his whole analysis, to play a role in developing the fluid-tradition theory's assumption that the *Sitz im Leben* of the early church helped to determine the composition and transmission of the sayings of Jesus. So, for his purposes, prophetic and historical sayings must be, indeed are bound to be, extensionally as well as definitionally distinct. Some prophetic sayings attributed to Jesus must not be actual sayings of the historical Jesus.

29. Ibid., 133–36.

30. Ibid., 204–6.

But which ones? Boring presents two criteria for distinguishing the sayings of the Christian prophets attributed to Jesus from the historical words of Jesus. “First, they [the sayings of the Christian prophets] must be able to be seen as having existed independently of a narrative context, even if they are now contained in narratives.” Second, there must be evidence that the sayings attributed to prophets derived from the post-Easter situation of the church.³¹ The first criterion, if applied in a context in which the authenticity of the Book of Mormon is at issue, would be question-begging, for it presumes the fluid-tradition theory. It presumes that some sayings of Jesus may not be, indeed, are certain not to be, the actual sayings of the historical Jesus but the sayings of Christian prophets. Those who accept the fluid-tradition theory typically assume that the text is a patchwork of previously separate sayings, while others, including those who accept a controlled-tradition view, see the text as an intricately woven unity. In any case, space requires that I limit myself to the most promising criterion.

How do you tell what the situational references of a text are?—by such indicators as definite descriptions, demonstratives, verb tenses, adverbs of time and space. But the explicit situational indicators provided by the synoptic texts are unreliable if the fluid-tradition theory is accepted. For these explicit indicators, if taken at face value, indicate that all prophetic sayings are sayings of the earthly Jesus. For example, according to Matthew, Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount on a mountain to his disciples and the multitudes, and he did so some time after he called his disciples and some time before he healed a leper and cured the servant of a centurion. The situational indicators provided here by the text must either be reinterpreted or set aside. Once this is done, what situational indicators remain very likely will be ambiguous, making the synoptic texts vulnerable to an interpretation in accord with the fluid-tradition theory.

If Boring’s classification system is employed, then we should anticipate that some sayings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount will certainly be seen as the words of prophets speaking for him. And we

31. Boring, *Sayings*, 57.

will be forced to conclude that the sermon was not delivered by Jesus himself. To make my analysis more concrete, let me take up an example of how Boring decides that a saying attributed to Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount was actually said by a Christian prophet. The text is the last beatitude (Matthew 5:11–12), which reads as follows: "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."

This saying, Boring claims, derives from the church and not from Jesus. "Unlike the first three," this beatitude "presupposes a church situation in which persons are suffering because of their faith in Jesus as the Son of Man." References to the person of Jesus and faith in him "point to a post-Easter situation." The last phrase of the beatitude makes "clear that the saying comes from a time in which new prophets have arisen, i.e., after Easter," and that the hearers are "in the succession of the prophets." The saying has "the tone of a proclamation in the worship of the gathered, persecuted community" where prophets speak "in the name of the risen Lord."³²

Like the other beatitudes, Matthew 5:11–12 manifests material and formal characteristics of prophetic speech. It is "formally a pronouncement of blessing"; "the basis of this pronouncement is obviously not practical wisdom but prophetic revelation"; it contains the "prophetic theme of persecution"; "the hearers seem to be addressed as members of a community that numbers prophets in its midst"; these prophets appear as living successors of "the prophets of Israel"; and this awareness of "being their successors . . . is typical of the Q-community."³³ Whether the prophetic speech of the last beatitude consists of the words of Jesus or the words of prophets speaking in the name of the risen Lord depends on whether Boring has successfully shown that the saying derives from the early church and not from Jesus.

Is he successful? Well, it is not too difficult to see that his account of the last beatitude is a logical consequence of assuming a version

32. Boring, *Sayings*, 139, 140.

33. *Ibid.*

of the fluid-tradition theory. In particular, he assumes that the *Sitz im Leben* of the early church helped determine the development of this saying. The text by itself does not require his interpretation, even though Boring says the beatitude “presupposes” the post-Easter situation of the early church and hence is derived from that situation and not from Jesus himself. “Presupposed” is much too strong a term. The indicators on which we usually rely in determining the situational references of the written form of oral discourse—definite descriptions, verb tenses, demonstratives, adverbs of time and space—are too oblique in the last beatitude. That saying presupposes the post-Easter situation of the early church, as Boring claims, if the *Sitz im Leben* hypothesis of a fluid-tradition theory is assumed. But if a controlled-tradition theory is assumed, one which holds that Jesus was deeply aware of his divine nature and mission and the importance of his saving message, then the last beatitude does not presuppose the post-Easter situation of the early church.

Consider Matthew 5:11–12 once more. To whom does “they” refer in “so persecuted *they* the prophets”? Boring thinks “they” refers to the synagogue during the post-Easter period.³⁴ Of course, in the King James Version (KJV) “they” refers back to “men” in verse 11, and in the Revised Standard Version (RSV) “they” in verse 12 is replaced by “men” and refers back to “men” in verse 11. So both the KJV and the RSV deprive the last beatitude of any specific reference to “they” by which to locate the situation of suffering that the last beatitude is about. The New English Bible (NEB), which is said to be more faithful to the text, excludes any mention of “men” in verse 11. Thus the NEB leaves “they” in verse 12 undefined. Let’s stick with the NEB, since it favors Boring’s position.

So in order to discover the situational reference of the beatitude, we must consider the reference to persecution of the prophets at the end of verse 12. Boring thinks that this reference is to a time when new prophets have arisen in the church and that the hearers are in the succession to the church prophets.³⁵ But the text does not require

34. *Ibid.*, 139.

35. *Ibid.*, 140.

this interpretation. Reference to succession of the prophets could be understood in terms of the well-established tradition that prophets are often persecuted by people to whom they are sent. Or the reference might even be to persecutions under way by the time John the Baptist was imprisoned and Jesus was "thrust out" of Nazareth. In either case, Jesus, anticipating further suffering and persecution, may have spoken the last beatitude to his disciples to prepare some of them for their future roles as prophets in service to the church after his atoning sacrifice.

Of course, all I have said assumes that the last "you" in verse 12 refers to Jesus's disciples and not to the multitudes. There is some ambiguity here, since the sermon begins with a reference to disciples and ends with a reference to the multitudes. As W. D. Davies observes concerning Matthew 5:15, "Like the rest of the SM, v.15 in Matthew is addressed both to the crowds (v. 1a and vii. 28) and to the disciples."³⁶ The sermon as recorded in 3 Nephi clears up this ambiguity (see 3 Nephi 12:1; 13:25; 14:1).

Boring also thinks that reference to faith in Jesus in the beatitude points to a post-Easter situation.³⁷ But this reference could also fit a pre-Easter situation, unless Boring's interpretation of other parts of the saying are presupposed or we assume that the faith in Jesus referred to was not understood by him at the time of his ministry.

Enough has been said about naturalistic methodology and the sermon to illustrate that Russell's attack on the Book of Mormon begs the question, even if his attack had been as carefully crafted as Boring's account usually is. Against the background of my discussion, Russell's test for the Book of Mormon would read: we have good reason to doubt the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon because the inclusion of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi does not square with the fluid-tradition account of its composition and transmission. Against the background of my discussion, question-begging occurs inasmuch as the *conclusion* that Jesus did not deliver the sermon, on

36. Davies, *Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, 457.

37. Boring, *Sayings*, 139.

which Russell's challenge to the Book of Mormon depends, results from assuming a naturalism, assuming the fluid-tradition theory rather than some version of the controlled-tradition theory, and employing a classification system that precludes rather than permits the possibility that the sayings in the sermon attributed to Jesus by Matthew are the actual sayings of the earthly Jesus. It should be mentioned that I have only *illustrated* how this question-begging occurs. It would require a much longer and more sophisticated work to analyze the problems of employing modern historical methodology in explaining sacred texts or even to critique in full a fluid-tradition account of the Sermon on the Mount.

Another Purpose for the Sermon in the Book of Mormon

We turn now to the last question of the paper: Why, according to the Book of Mormon, was Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount included in 3 Nephi? It is one thing to show that Jesus could have delivered the sermon to the people of Jerusalem but another thing to explain why he would give it to the ancient Americans in nearly the same words.

What does the Book of Mormon claim as its purpose? As is well known, its purpose includes restoring parts of the gospel lost in the formation of the Bible, establishing the truth of the Bible, convincing Jews and Gentiles that records of the prophets and apostles of the Lamb are true, and making known that the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father and the Savior of the world (see 2 Nephi 29; 1 Nephi 13). The first two purposes imply that the truth and testimony of the Bible have been corrupted; another witness is needed. The Book of Mormon gives two reasons that help account for the corruption of the Bible. One is that plain and precious things will be lost from the gospel *before* the Bible "goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles" (1 Nephi 13:29). Another reason, a more interesting one for our purposes, is that *after* the Bible has gone forth, the "holy word of God" will be "transfigured" by the interpretation of men (Mormon 8:33). This transfiguration of the Bible will take place during the time the Book of Mormon goes forth to Jews and Gentiles (see Mormon 8:23–34).

It is important that we understand what Moroni means by his reference to the transfigured word and how that reference is related to the purpose of the Book of Mormon. Let me quote the key passage: "O ye wicked and perverse and stiffnecked people, why have ye built up churches unto yourselves to get gain? Why have ye transfigured the holy word of God, that ye might bring damnation upon your souls? Behold, look ye unto the revelations of God; for behold, the time cometh at that day when all these things must be fulfilled" (Mormon 8:33).

The textual context of this quotation is the situation in the world that prevails when the Book of Mormon is brought forth. What this verse does is divide a series of "come-in-a-day" passages that describe the conditions under which the Book of Mormon will come forth from a series of "behold" passages that are a call to repentance. The second series repeats the themes of the first series and expands upon them. For example, in the first series—the "come-in-a-day" passages—we learn that when the Book of Mormon is brought forth "it shall be said that miracles are done away" (Mormon 8:26). In the second series—the "behold" passages—this point is repeated and greatly elaborated in a call to repentance (Mormon 9). We have before us a chiasmus-like structure.

Consider again Mormon 8:33. As I said, this verse divides the first and second series of passages. The first sentence of the quotation repeats the content of the last passage of the first series—building up churches for gain—using the interrogative form. In this way, the first sentence helps introduce the call to repentance of the second series using the content of the last verse of the first series. The last sentence in the quotation introduces the second set of passages in the same way the first set is introduced—by referring to the revelations of God (Mormon 8:23, 33). The middle sentence, "Why have ye transfigured the holy word of God, that ye might bring damnation upon your souls?" is the keystone sentence to which all passages in both series are ultimately related. It is the only sentence whose content, explicitly or implicitly, is not a repeat of previous material and is not repeated in material that follows. It stands as the pivotal sentence for all that comes before and after it. The phrase *holy word of God* in that sentence

refers to the revelations mentioned at the beginning of each series of verses and provides the link between the two series. It is these revelations that have been “transfigured.”

Both references (in each series) to the revelations of God are to the word of God in the Bible, particularly to the prophecies of Isaiah. Moroni draws out the pure meaning of certain biblical revelations, which refer to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and then reaffirms them prophetically, saying “the Lord hath shown unto me [these same] great and marvelous things” (Mormon 8:34). In this way, through the prophet Moroni, the Book of Mormon fulfills its purpose as a second witness to the Bible and in particular to what the Bible says about the Book of Mormon.

What Mormon tells us about transfiguring the word of God is a type with many tokens. By the day in which the Book of Mormon comes forth, the transfiguration of the Bible will have seriously distorted its meaning and undermined its authority. My discussion in the last section illustrates the transfiguring effect of a fluid-tradition account of the sayings of Jesus. What is at stake in such an account is the reliability of the New Testament as the historical foundation of Christian faith. To concede that many of the sayings of Jesus are simply products of the early church, written in response to the post-Easter situation, tends to weaken convictions about the authority of the Gospels. But convictions will be strengthened if we conclude that Jesus commanded that his saving word be preserved and also that written sources were used in composing the Gospels. In short, it cannot be denied that if the witness of the Gospels taken at face value is true, then Bible scholarship, when unflinchingly carried out under the direction of a naturalistic methodology or in accord with the fluid-tradition theory, has indeed transfigured the word.

It is not difficult to see, then, why Matthew’s version of the Sermon on the Mount might well be included in 3 Nephi. By delivering the sermon in the same words as in Matthew, Jesus made it possible for the Book of Mormon to fulfill its purpose in a dramatic and singular way. The inclusion of Matthew’s sermon precisely fulfills the purpose of the Book of Mormon in a world in which the original word of God

has been seriously transfigured. In light of the effect of that transfiguration on the sayings of Jesus, it is fitting that the sermon in Matthew be given in the same words in 3 Nephi. Jesus did the perfect thing, in view of New Testament scholarship, to falsify the fluid-tradition theory and confirm a controlled-tradition view of his sayings. I see in what he did a splendid example of divine irony.

What the Book of Mormon tells us about the sermon being in the "same words" is also striking. Every student of the Book of Mormon is conversant with the passage in 2 Nephi that reads: "Know ye not that the testimony of two nations is a witness unto you that I am God, that I remember one nation like unto another? Wherefore, I speak the *same words* unto one nation like unto another. And when the two nations shall run together the testimony of the two nations shall run together also" (2 Nephi 29:8). I do not suggest, of course, that the term *same words* in the above passage always means literally the same words in every context. But sometimes the term means that, and one of those times is when the sermon was given by Jesus to the Nephites. The reason I am so confident is that the phrase *same words* receives explicit definition in 3 Nephi with reference to the sermon itself.

After Jesus delivered the sermon, in nearly the same words as in Matthew, that same sermon was given by the Nephite twelve, again literally in the same words, to those not present the first time. Mormon made sure in his narrative that later readers would know about this literal repetition of the sermon by explicitly defining in what sense the sermon was given a second time in the "same words." Mormon tells us that the Nephite twelve, under the command of Jesus, "ministered those same words which Jesus had spoken," including the sermon, and then he makes sure we do not misunderstand him by adding "nothing varying from the words which Jesus had spoken" (3 Nephi 19:8). Clearly, Mormon too was duty bound to record the sermon in his compilation in the same words as it came from Jesus, "nothing varying."³⁸

38. Two observations should be made in passing. First, the sermon is an integral part of the sayings and works of Jesus in 3 Nephi, and if it were not there, his message to the Nephites would be incomplete. Second, the sermon is an integral part of the moral theory

Let me review parts of this discussion of the purpose of the Book of Mormon and draw out some obvious but important implications in anticipation of devising a test of its authenticity. First, the Book of Mormon anticipates that the Bible will be corrupted partly because it has been transfigured by the interpretations of men. Second, the Book of Mormon presents itself as a second witness in this situation and reaffirms the original word in its purity. The implication is that the Book of Mormon and the transfigured word are at odds. And third, it will fulfill its purpose by being brought forth in the form of an ancient text that contains the holy word of God.

These three points cannot be separated in a consideration of the nature of the Book of Mormon. If it had no purpose to fulfill, there would be no point to its being an ancient text. But if the Book of Mormon is not an ancient, sacred text, then it cannot fulfill its self-declared purpose. And if the historical situation for fulfilling its purpose did not materialize, then its purpose would be stillborn and its existence as an ancient, sacred text would be somewhat of an anomaly. For the Book of Mormon to be true as claimed, these three conditions must exist together. They constitute key parts of the book's explanation of itself.

Those who argue against the claims of the Book of Mormon must give an alternative account of why the Book of Mormon exists. They must explain away one or more of the three points of the Book of Mormon's purpose. Russell, as we know, challenges the claim that the book is an ancient text. If that challenge were to succeed, it would be sufficient to show that the book is not true in the sense claimed. What the test of the Book of Mormon's historical authenticity comes down to, then, is which account of its origin can ultimately succeed.

What historical test should we devise for choosing between these opposing explanations of the Book of Mormon? In answering this question, we should keep several points in mind. First, the Book of

and wider gospel of the Book of Mormon. Indeed, putting the sermon in the Book of Mormon constitutes an interpretation that reveals its profound unity, which is otherwise difficult to discern. But it would take a book-length discussion to support this claim. That is why I mention it only in passing.

Mormon tells us that there will be opposition to it in the latter-day world. Some of this opposition helps create the situation in which the book can fulfill its purpose. So any test of the book's authenticity must not assume or imply that the occurrence of the anticipated opposition automatically counts against the book. For example, the Book of Mormon indicates that certain latter-day interpretations of the Bible (in this case, on the part of Bible scholars) will transfigure it. This implies that the Book of Mormon and these interpretations will be in conflict since part of its purpose is to reconfirm the original, uncorrupted Bible. To make the occurrence of this conflict a test of the book's validity is tantamount to assuming that the book is not true because if the Book of Mormon does *not* square with Bible scholarship, then those using this test have good reason to doubt it. And even if the book *were* to square with Bible scholarship, those applying the test also have good reason to doubt it, because then the book is inconsistent with the fulfillment of its own purpose. Such an arbitrary test makes it impossible for the Book of Mormon to win.

Second, those devising a historical test of the Book of Mormon should keep in mind that the book itself is the subject of the opposing accounts to be tested—the Book of Mormon's own account of itself and alternative accounts of it. This situation is different from one in which two competing theories explain some phenomenon separate from either of them. In the case of explaining the Book of Mormon, the book accounts for itself and for the opposition to it on the one hand, and on the other hand the book itself is the subject of an account by a theory or theories that the book anticipates will oppose it. This state of affairs may tempt us to devise a test that automatically makes any opposing explanation of the Book of Mormon a confirmation of it. (Such a test would make falsification of the book impossible.) In short, any test of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon must not make its falsification or confirmation impossible.

Let me now suggest in outline a historical test of the Book of Mormon's authenticity that does not beg the question. The test provides a basis for choosing between the book's own account of itself and any opposing account of it. It should be remembered that any opposing

account must explain the book's account of itself. Accordingly, the content of the test should make reference to what the book is all about, including what it tells us about itself. The content of the test will consist of three parts:

a. The Book of Mormon claims to be an ancient, sacred text compiled in order to deliver God's holy word to the people of the last days. This is a very complex claim indeed. That the book claims to be an ancient document implies that it will possess the characteristics of such a document. And that it claims to be a sacred text containing God's word indicates that it will present an intricate prophetic view of the world and of man's relation to God within it, particularly the world of the latter days. Both of these claims make the book susceptible to many subtle tests.

b. The Book of Mormon claims that the Bible as a witness of God's work will be in certain difficulties in the last days, due in part to the transfiguring effect of Bible scholarship. Here we have another complex claim. To unravel what the book means by the transfigured word by itself is a formidable task that includes having a knowledge of contemporary Bible scholarship and commentary.

c. The Book of Mormon claims that it represents a solution to the Bible's difficulty, which means, among other things, that it was brought forth by the hand of God to reaffirm the original, unchanged word and, consequently, that it will be at odds with the transfigured word.

With (a) through (c) before us, the test of the Book of Mormon's authenticity is this: The Book of Mormon is authentic only if its claims (a), (b), and (c) are all true. If claims (a), (b), and (c) are true, then there is good reason, but not conclusive reason, to accept its claim of authenticity. But if any of these claims is not true, then the Book of Mormon is not authentic.

Of course, in this paper I have not tried to argue that the Book of Mormon does fulfill conditions (a) through (c), only that opponents of the Book of Mormon have not made their case. However, I am convinced that opponents of the Book of Mormon do not understand how strong the case is that has already been made on the book's be-

half. The book is a much more formidable opponent than they make it out to be.

Let's compare Russell's test of the Book of Mormon's historical authenticity with the test just proposed. According to Russell's test in the argument I critiqued, there is reason to doubt the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon if it is inconsistent with the fluid-tradition theory of the traditions of Jesus. As is apparent, Russell's test and my test are inconsistent with one another. My test indicates that, if authentic, the Book of Mormon and the transfiguring interpretation of the Bible will be at odds, and if this were not the case, then opponents of the book would have reason to reject its claim to be true. But Russell claims that because the Book of Mormon is at odds with the fluid-tradition theory of the New Testament, it should be rejected.

As I have shown, it is not enough for Russell simply to show that the Book of Mormon and biblical scholarship are at odds; he must show further that this counts against and not for the Book of Mormon. It is possible to do this; the book is not logically immune to attack under my test. But Russell simply assumed that such disagreement automatically undercuts the Book of Mormon; by making this assumption a basic premise in his argument, *he begs an important question.*

Appendix

Could Jesus have delivered the Sermon on the Mount as it is recorded in Matthew? The following reasons offer cumulative support for an affirmative answer.

1. Whether we think Jesus may have delivered the sermon as found in Matthew depends on what we believe about him. There are several opposing views. One is that Jesus was aware of his divine nature and mission of atonement; he understood that only through him could mankind be saved, and hence he saw to it that his message to the world was passed on with great care. Another view sees Jesus as a charismatic leader who used the oral medium and did not speak with a conscious regard for literary retention. "As oral performer he had neither need nor use for textual aids, nor did he speak with an eye

toward textual preservation.”³⁹ The Jesus of the first view could have given the sermon recorded in Matthew.

2. Whether Jesus might have delivered the Sermon on the Mount depends on how his close followers, especially the apostles and the author of Matthew, regarded him. Birger Gerhardsson is worth quoting at length on this point:

We know how great was the reverence accorded to the leaders of the early Church—“the three pillars” or “the twelve”—by the Christians of the first century. . . . But when these great men come to be compared with Jesus Christ, then no more is heard of their authority, their maturity, their knowledge, their wisdom and their insight. Never for one moment are we allowed to forget the distance between the “only” teacher and these others. In the Gospels we see that only Jesus gave positive teaching; “the twelve” are mentioned, as his disciples, servants and messengers, but never as mediators of their own teaching. The Evangelists are only interested in mediating the words and works of *Jesus*; the traditionalists have nothing to say—not even in passing—about any creative contribution made by a Peter, a James or a John to the teaching of Jesus Christ. . . . It would be well to keep this in mind in face of skeptical scholars’ attempts to show that the tradition of Jesus is a free compilation on the part of the early Church: that they took up sayings which were in circulation, and placed them in the mouth of Jesus; that they themselves freely created “sayings of Jesus”; that they projected sayings of early Christian prophets back into the life of Jesus; and the like.⁴⁰

3. It is reasonable to believe that some among the close companions of Jesus had the ability to record his sayings. The world of Jesus was literate to a high degree. Indeed, as C. H. Roberts explains, “writ-

39. Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 19.

40. Gerhardsson, *Tradition and Transmission*, 42–43.

ing was an essential accompaniment of life at almost all levels to an extent without parallel in living memory."⁴¹

4. Jesus and his followers belonged to a culture that, as noted earlier, had a deeply rooted tradition of preserving the sacred texts in word-perfect form. Writes Roberts, "The strictest rules governed the handling, the reading and the copying of the Law. Multiplication of copies by dictation was not allowed; each scroll had to be copied directly from another scroll; official copies, until A.D. 70 derived ultimately from a master copy in the Temple, were kept at first in a cupboard in each synagogue, later in a room adjoining it. The cupboard faced towards Jerusalem, and the rolls within it were the most holy objects in the synagogue."⁴²

The general attitude of the early church toward the sacred writings of "the new dispensation was much the same."⁴³ So it is unlikely that the Christian community of the first century would have "studiously refrained from putting into writing traditions of the life and teaching of Jesus for the first thirty years of its existence."⁴⁴

5. If the above points are sound, then it is very plausible that if any sayings of Jesus were preserved as they came from his mouth, then the words of the sermon were. Klaus Koch, who incidentally does not accept the conclusion I am defending, admits that if there were "recognised bearers of tradition," then it is to be "assumed that the wording of the sayings and stories was meticulously preserved."⁴⁵ He continues, "In the New Testament the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, and the logia of Jesus as a whole retained a much more fixed form than the descriptions of what Jesus did, or of the apostles' experiences."⁴⁶

41. C. H. Roberts, "Books in the Graeco-Roman World and in the New Testament," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), 1:48. See *Pistis Sophia*, 58–61.

42. Roberts, "Books in the Graeco-Roman World," 49–50.

43. *Ibid.*, 50.

44. David Wenham, "Source Criticism," in *New Testament Interpretations*, 139.

45. Klaus Koch, *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition: The Form-Critical Method* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1969), 88.

46. Koch, *Growth of the Biblical Tradition*, 91.

6. In Matthew the Sermon on the Mount is explicitly attributed to Jesus. This should count for something, given the other observations already made.

7. Finally, the inclusion of the Sermon on the Mount in the Book of Mormon reveals to the careful and discerning student the profound and intricate unity of the sermon. It is highly plausible that Jesus himself gave the sermon.