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Title Editor's Introduction: Knowing Brother Joseph Again

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Abstract Midgley explains the need for people to learn about and come to know Joseph Smith as the man who restored the gospel of Jesus Christ to the earth.

Editor's Introduction

KNOWING BROTHER JOSEPH AGAIN

Louis Midgley, associate editor

The truth you speak doth lack some gentleness.

William Shakespeare¹

There have been times when I have been, as my former students might testify, obsessed with the words and deeds of James Madison and Alexis de Tocqueville, as well as various theologians and philosophers. I know these authors only by pondering texts written by or about them. But they have, despite my passion for their writings, been for me merely of secondary concern. There are a few others—Joseph Smith is an example—who are permanently in my thoughts, even more so than my own parents. Why am I haunted by him? Why should all of us come to know Brother Joseph? I will try to explain. I will also describe and then draw some preliminary conclusions from my own initial encounters with challenging explanations and jarring bits of information about Joseph.

More than those others about whom I have or once had an intellectual curiosity, for me Brother Joseph holds a key to something deep in my soul. His words and deeds ground my faith. From time to time I have revisited him in the hope of knowing him better. When a new essay or book appears, even—or especially—an attack on him, I am back at it again. I very much want to be aware of and reflect on all that

1. *The Tempest*, 2.1.138 (Riverside ed.).

can be known of Joseph's life and times and on the Book of Mormon. Hence I am not displeased to encounter new textual sources, new bits of information, and new explanations.² For me this is an obedient way to enrich my faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the redeemer of lost souls, including my own. I thus long to know Brother Joseph again.

Since I was a child, I have known some things about Brother Joseph. I can still remember the gathering in which I first became aware of his encounters with the heavenly messenger that eventually resulted in the recovery of the Book of Mormon. I have even imagined that I knew him just as he was. I was, of course, wrong. Our portrait of Joseph is not, cannot, and should not be stagnant. I have discovered that each of us—friend or foe—fashions his or her own Joseph Smith. We tend to make him what we want him to be. Those who strive to tell his story, I have noticed, often seem to be in an adversarial relationship with him. Those coming to him with different preconceptions think they know him. To borrow the pithy language of C. S. Lewis, each of our experiences with Joseph “proves this, or that, or nothing, according to the preconceptions we bring to it.”³ Others have, of

2. I treasure a book I first encountered in 1951. It is the second of two volumes by Francis W. Kirkham (1877–1972), published in several editions under the title *A New Witness for Christ in America: The Book of Mormon* (Independence, MO: Zion's Printing and Publishing, 1951). (I met Francis Kirkham in 1950. He had been a missionary to New Zealand, and my father thought I should meet him prior to my own mission there. He had written what was called *Kirkham's Maori Grammar, or Lessons for Beginners in the Maori Language*, 2nd ed. [Auckland, New Zealand: New Zealand Mission, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1947].) I was delighted when I encountered his collection of essays and commentary. He had included some forty-five attacks on the Book of Mormon published while Joseph Smith was still alive, as well as many that were subsequently published. This book, though flawed by contemporary editorial standards, is still a useful collection of these materials. In the midnineties, I convinced those at FARMS to fund what I called “The Kirkham Project.” The goal was to collect and make available everything published on the Book of Mormon during Joseph Smith's lifetime. Matt Roper has been working on this project for years and, with the assistance of many others, has assembled in chronological order some 450 items, including even the title page to the original *Mother Goose*. These materials will appear under the tentative title *Recovery of the Book of Mormon: Early Published Documents* and will be made available in CD-ROM format.

3. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 26. The entire passage reads as follows: “For let us make no mistake. If the end of the world appeared in all the literal trappings of the

course, managed to fashion a different Joseph than the one I think I know. I have, however, learned much from the way both friend and foe have pictured him.

Fortifying Faith

Elsewhere I have shown that even those who detest the very idea of divine things, however they are understood, and who are secular fundamentalists confident in their atheism necessarily rest their beliefs upon an intellectual history whose pages are to them often virtually blank. Their faith or unfaith, as it may be called, rests upon the opinions of an army of earlier writers whose names they may not even know. Since their atheism is not unique to them, they must hope that in the past others have already managed to demonstrate that faith in God, in whatever form, is an illusion or delusion.⁴ Since my faith, as well as yours—even if you imagine that you have none, have a different one, or have one that you do not recognize as a faith—is dependent on accounts of the past, it is therefore, in this sense, historical and therefore vulnerable to skeptical historical inquiry. I fancy that I am engaged, on the margins and with whatever intellectual powers I possess, in just such an inquiry.

The faith of the Saints is primarily historical; it has clear historical content as well as grounding. It is more intimately rooted in events in the past than any faith with which I am familiar. Our way of setting forth this historical content—or understanding and explaining it—forms and shapes our faith. Or our encounter with this history provides the justification for not having or abandoning faith. This is as it should be; if those events did not take place or were radically unlike our understanding of them, then our preaching has been false and our faith in vain (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:14). However, the reverse is

Apocalypse, if the modern materialist saw with his own eyes . . . , he would continue forever . . . to regard his experience as an illusion and to find the explanation of it in psychoanalysis, or cerebral pathology. . . . Experience proves this, or that, or nothing, according to the preconceptions we bring to it.”

4. See Louis Midgley, “The First Steps,” *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): xi–lv, at xxxii–xxxvi.

also true. This, I believe, explains my obsession with Brother Joseph and the Book of Mormon. Knowing more about Joseph enriches and fortifies our faith.

The Saints most vulnerable to having their faith despoiled by competing or different accounts of the restoration are those who have just begun to nurture the seed of faith. Some go missing when they encounter previously unknown details or bits of speculation—something they may insist they never were told in Sunday School—about Joseph Smith; others are troubled when they encounter some new or old criticism of the Book of Mormon. In addition, some of those for whom Joseph is a flawless, two-dimensional, cardboard figure may also find their faith fragile when they discover that there is both less and much more to him than they previously imagined. For one to become and then flourish as a Latter-day Saint, I believe that one must ceaselessly ponder Joseph Smith and his prophetic witness, as well as his divine special revelations, especially the Book of Mormon. The faith of the Saints is thereby sustained and nurtured by close attention to God's mighty acts in the past, many of which have clearly made use of flawed human beings not entirely unlike our associates and ourselves. We should not fear but long for further light and knowledge about the wonders of the past.

Some Differences and Resemblances

Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant faith is grounded in the Bible, which proclaims, among other things, that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. In at least conservative circles within these faith communities, the resurrection of Jesus is still believed to be an actual historical event and not merely a metaphor or a symbol for something else. Likewise, the belief that Jesus is the Messiah or Christ is in this sense historical. In addition, there are many other claims that seem to me to be historical. For instance, the insistence that the great ecumenical creeds capture the essence of Christian faith seems to me to be historical and is therefore open to alternative explanations. The emergence of what is thought of as Christian orthodoxy is worked over by historians. Some may argue that what is now considered ortho-

doxy was winnowed from earlier heresies understood as different, and perhaps competing, ways of understanding Jesus of Nazareth. So it appears that faith that rests on, flows from, or involves stories such as those found in the Bible is historical and therefore open to both the scrutiny of historians, as well as manipulation by theologians. All faith that rests on purported divine special revelations or on theophanies is open to competing explanations or is vulnerable in various ways to assault from skeptics.

Unlike the community of Latter-day Saints, the founding and shaping events of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith took place long ago and far away. In each case the fateful stories were frozen in textual materials written, edited, and preserved by those within those communities. The resulting texts were clearly intended to describe and transmit the faith. In addition, the biblical stories and other related lore were long ago enshrined in stained glass and stone. Those stories and their veneration eventually became part of the intellectual and material culture of at least Europe. Churchmen and princes often worked hand in glove to bolster the authority of each other by preventing challenges to the Christian lore. These religions appeared, of course, long before the Enlightenment and the resulting contemporary culture of unbelief—that is, before the acids of modernity began to corrode all faith in divine things. None of this is true of the faith of the Saints. There has always been a battle for the control of the Mormon past.

Despite the remote, mostly biblical historical content of Protestant religiosity, little attention is paid to the fine details of sectarian history. There are several reasons for this. One does not become a Baptist by discovering how there came to be a Southern Baptist Convention. Likewise, one is not likely to cease being a Baptist by discovering quirks in some denominational history or flaws in the personality of some preacher. Something like this is true for all Protestants without regard to whether their faction has been taken over by conservatives or infiltrated by theological liberals. Other than providing an explanation for the sources of certain theological differences,⁵ Protestant denominational

5. These quarrels are not over history and thus not over the historicity of founding theophanies but over the niceties or fine points of dogmatic theology. An example of what

(or church) history is mostly of narrow, antiquarian interest—a mere curiosity that is mostly irrelevant to faith. In addition, in America, and elsewhere as well, the old denominational identities have begun to fade. Congregations may now lack discernible denominational attachments. Be that as it may, it turns out that for Protestants it is dogmatic theology, rather than denominational history, that is decisive. By contrast, both the content and ground of the faith of Latter-day Saints depends directly upon the reality of an array of founding revelations, theophanies, and other closely related shaping events. These, of course, focus directly on Joseph Smith and the scriptures he provided.

The faith of Protestants is still historical (or has historical content) precisely because it rests on accounts found in the Bible. This, of course, is also true for Latter-day Saints. Being historical in this sense makes the faith of both Protestants and Latter-day Saints, as well as other Christians, vulnerable to skeptical historical inquiries. This may explain the insistence of conservative Protestants on at least the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible, if not on its sufficiency. This seems to me to be, in part, a way of shielding the historical elements in the Bible from historical criticism. If I am right, this may help explain why contemporary conservative Protestants insist on inerrancy despite its obvious ambiguity. However, there are other possible reasons why fundamentalists/evangelicals now typically insist on the inerrancy of the Bible. The putative infallibility of the Bible is easily transferred from the text to the interpretation of the text and hence to the ideological content of what is being preached. This can be seen when preachers insist that they speak for orthodox, historic, trinitarian, biblical Christianity. Infallibility shields the dogmas of a particular theology from criticism, but this is merely a corollary of a dogma meant to protect the historical ground of conservative Protestant faith.

The Saints have never enjoyed protection from skeptical, alternative, or otherwise critical accounts of the founding of their faith. Even

I have in mind is the question of whether the atonement of Jesus Christ is *universal* in the sense that anyone who may come to believe can thereby be saved (an Arminian stance) or whether the atonement is strictly *limited* to those who were at the very moment of creation predestined by God to be saved (a radical Calvinist stance).

prior to the publication of the Book of Mormon, the story of its recovery was being mocked and garbled in small-town newspapers. Brother Joseph's activities were attacked by hostile pamphleteers, preachers, and politicians, as well as disparaged by affidavit collectors (or fabricators) and reviled by apostates. A vast array of textual materials was published or otherwise preserved. Mormon beginnings, though they have been contested from the very start, are not shrouded in obscurity. From the moment Brother Joseph began telling his story, nothing shielded him, the Book of Mormon, and his followers from mockery and enmity. There is simply no way that the Saints can hide much of anything in their past or shield themselves from attacks. In this regard, nothing much has changed other than the scope and intensity of the barrages, which seem to have increased. There have always been conflicting, alternative accounts of the beginnings of the community of Saints. The battle over the control of the Mormon past has never ceased or abated.

Being a Latter-day Saint involves knowing Brother Joseph. One problem is, as Davis Bitton has pointed out, that “many who staunchly accept him as a prophet know little of his biography.”⁶ I agree. This is unfortunate since it encourages critics to pound away with sometimes tasteless or even scurrilous exposés and to complain about what they insist is a falsified history of the Mormon past.⁷ From the moment that Joseph Smith began to tell of the things he experienced, both he and those who became Saints were confronted with calumny and withering ridicule. The faithful, it seems, must pass through a refiner's fire.

6. Davis Bitton, *Images of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1996), 47.

7. For a sampling of books published 2001–2003 that contain charges of sinister conspiracies, deception, and distortion involving Joseph Smith and his followers, see Charles L. Wood, *The Mormon Conspiracy: A Review of Present Day and Historical Conspiracies to Mormonize America and the World* (Chula Vista, CA: Black Forest, 2001); Ethan E. Harris, *The Gospel according to Joseph Smith: A Christian Response to Mormon Teaching*, foreword by Bill McKeever (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001); Richard Abanes, *One Nation under Gods: A History of the Mormon Church* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002); Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002); Martin Wishnatsky, *Mormonism: A Latter Day Deception* (Fargo, ND: Xulon, 2003); and Arza Evans, *The Keystone of Mormonism* (St. George, UT: Keystone Books, 2003).

To become and remain a Saint has always demanded that one make a decision on the authenticity of the Book of Mormon as well as on the veracity of the crucial elements in Brother Joseph's claims.

For various reasons, both then and now, some are only loosely attached to the faith of the Saints; some are merely cultural Mormons. I initially fashioned the expression *cultural Mormon* from the German *Kulturprotestantismus*,⁸ which once identified a kind of "liberal" (or nominal) Protestant religiosity. What that label identified in German-speaking lands has become ubiquitous in Europe, though perhaps less so in America. There are now numerous cultural (or ethnic) Protestants and Roman Catholics and even Muslims and Jews. In each case there is little or no concern with or overt commitment to the historical authenticity of the founding theophanies. (There has also been, rather unfortunately from my perspective, a shedding of the basic ethos of these communities, which now may manifest merely nominal religiosity.) Attachment to embodiments of biblical faith, other than within a circle of primitive believers, has become blandly cultural, a matter of national or ethnic identity, or perhaps nostalgia. I believe that part of the reason for this trend is that within the various Christian traditions the crucial founding events have long been pictured as merely figurative, metaphorical, strictly symbolic or poetic; the crucial stories have thereby been reduced to the largely legendary, merely mythical, to matters of mere sentiment, to expressions of traditional piety, and so forth. As this has happened, the formal trappings remain, but the substance has melted away. The resulting vacuum has been filled, especially in Europe, with something else—often a blatant hedonism that hides from the terrible questions behind a casual atheism.⁹

8. See Louis Midgley, "The Secular Relevance of the Gospel," *Dialogue* 4/4 (1969): 76–85, at 78, for the specific use of the *Kulturprotestantismus* as the source for my label *cultural Mormonism*. The expressions *cultural Mormonism* and *cultural Mormon* have subsequently become popular replacements for earlier fuzzy expressions like "liberal Mormon," which would seem to be an oxymoron like "hard softness" or "round square."

9. This is manifested in portions of what have become known as the current "culture wars." The passionate appeal for a militant, public atheism can be found in a spate of recent bestsellers. See, for example, Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004), and the review of this book by Michael D. Jibson, "Imagine," in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 233–64.

Faith involving the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's encounters with messengers from another world seems to have been initially attractive to some who were seeking similar modes of divine special revelation and thus were open to such possibilities. In addition, Brother Joseph began as a seeker and a visionary; he was at ease with fellow visionaries. But he was far more—he was a seer, as well as the prophet authorized to speak for God in the new dispensation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This kingdom was intended to be a prophetic community in which each of the Saints could know the divine for themselves. As Terryl Givens has recently shown, for the faithful the Book of Mormon and the account of its recovery has served as a sign that the heavens are once again open, that Joseph Smith is God's prophet, that the end time is approaching, and that the world is again pulsing with divine power.¹⁰ The divine special revelations in the Book of Mormon are actual conversations or dialogues with deity; they are not mere momentary and ineffable flashes or ephemeral feelings.

The Book of Mormon, coupled with Joseph's own story, invited the Saints to enter for themselves into an enchanting and enchanted world. This notion of divine disclosure is radically different from traditional concepts of revelation found among sectarian Christians, including mystical intuitions, or much that typically takes place in Pentecostal circles. The revelatory process the Saints are encouraged to enter is exemplified by the way in which the Book of Mormon was recovered. In addition, the Book of Mormon urges those who receive it to begin to experience the manifestations of the divine for themselves in ways that radically diverge from the interiority and subjectivity of much religious discourse; it thus moves away from the nebulous substance of myth or mysticism. But a faith responding to encounters with the divine in the sensible world, though it clearly has its attractions and advantages, is also a double-edged sword because the founding theophanies and resulting texts, as well as the experiences of the Saints, are open to the scrutiny of a scholarship often grounded on entirely secular assumptions.

10. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

In addition, much sectarian theological discourse has tended to emphasize the radical otherness of God, who is supposed to be *ganz anders* (“wholly other”), utterly transcendent, beyond time and space, and so forth. In such a theology there is said to be an infinite qualitative difference between God and mere finite creatures. This way of seeing divine things stresses not merely the frailty of language, which all would concede, including Brother Joseph, but the essential inability of language to describe divine things with any concreteness. The most radical version of this tendency is found in mystical theology and is illustrated by most of those who are labeled mystics. Their intuitions are said to be strictly ineffable. This explains why those devoted to mystical theology have, as far as I have been able to discover, never included Brother Joseph in their ranks. Instead, those steeped in traditional theological perspectives, especially those caught up in meditation and mystical reveries, are offended because the Book of Mormon, the story of its recovery, and the artifacts or relics associated with it (the interpreters or seer stones, the metal plates, and so forth) cannot be explained away as merely figurative, allegorical, or mythical or as highly symbolic ways of talking about what is, for them, ultimately ineffable and entirely mysterious.

Brother Joseph’s Role in the Faith of the Saints

Brother Joseph’s own remarkable encounters with the divine, sometimes with others as witnesses or active participants, invite the Saints to encounter a past that is both extended and deepened, one that also opens for us, through faith and obedience to God’s commands, an amazing future of genuine wonder and also a hope for a glory beyond the paltry parade of pride and power politics currently taking place here below. While we face the inevitable terrors of our probation, we do so with a hope of redemption from sin and death made possible by the Messiah or Christ. If we genuinely remember God’s mighty redemptive deeds, there is open to all of us a world pervaded with divine purpose and power. We are guided into this enchanted world by looking back to a vast array of encounters with the divine by prophets and seers and their associates, including those by Brother Joseph—the

seer of the dispensation of the fulness of times. What Joseph provided assists us to confront and overcome the consequences of forgetfulness and rebellion against God. Faith provides hope and should infuse us with love. But, when we covenant with God, we are promised blessings for faithfulness or cursings for our infidelities. Given the tremors of our probation, we must renew our covenants often.

As far back as I can remember, Joseph Smith and his world and the texts he recovered or otherwise provided have filled my imagination, challenged my conceits, formed my identity, and grounded my faith in the redemption made by Jesus of Nazareth from both sin and mortality. It was through Brother Joseph that I came to know of a world with grand assemblies, designs for our mortal probation, and heated deliberations and also of a war between competing factions for the destiny of all of us—a war that still goes on here below. My faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah is thus grounded on Joseph’s prophetic witness. His legacy as a seer is a crucial element of my own identity. This is true of the Saints generally. It is so for those who have come into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints already familiar in some degree with the Bible and a sectarian version of Christian faith. Whatever they may have brought with them has been rectified, modified, and supplemented with what they receive from Brother Joseph.

Despite his highly unfavorable, lowly beginnings, Brother Joseph anticipated leaving his mark. He believed from the moment he first encountered heavenly messengers, especially when he learned from one of them of an ancient history inscribed on metal plates containing a prophetic account of God’s dealings with peoples who had migrated from the Near East to the Americas, that what he would gradually set in place would come to bless the peoples of every land.¹¹ Toward the end of his ministry, Joseph indicated that he had been warned at the very beginning of his vocation by a heavenly messenger that both “good and evil” would be spoken about him and that his “name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues”

11. Zion, of course, would at first be gathered to particular places, but eventually the stakes of the tent of Israel would be planted everywhere and Zion’s banner would come to wave throughout the entire world.

(Joseph Smith—History 1:33). I was reminded during the various bicentennial celebrations of the birth of Joseph Smith of the closing line of “Praise to the Man”—one of my favorite hymns—which reads as follows: “Millions shall know ‘Brother Joseph’ again.”¹² Ironically our enemies cannot seem to prevent this, and their efforts even help make it happen.

Brother Joseph is very much present in the ideologies and demonologies of many who in diverse but related ways detest everything associated with him. Even perhaps providentially, disbelief and incredulity, if not outright hatred and hostility, have done much to keep him alive in the memories of the covenant people of God. Indeed, the Saints seem to have actually needed enemies who, without even knowing it, are dedicated to keeping them from slipping back into the fog of the currently fashionable world by forcing them to confront the content and grounds of their faith, thereby refining, testing, and proving them. For this we can thank Joseph’s many critics—both past and present.

As the bicentennial commemorative events for Brother Joseph took place during 2005, I was reminded that the memory of virtually all of his contemporaries, even of those much better situated and educated, has simply disappeared, often without leaving much of a trace.¹³ If the names of some of his neighbors and some of his associates remain, it is in genealogies, somewhat ironically, now laboriously assembled and carefully preserved by those influenced by his legacy. Some, of course, are known merely because they in some way got involved with him. Many have become mere tiny fragments in some statistical abstraction or as nameless, faceless elements in generalizations about vague movements set out in accounts of the American past. Or, if they are still

12. See W. W. Phelps, “Praise to the Man,” *Hymns*, no. 27, last line of the fourth verse.

13. Tiny exceptions include John C. Bennett, whose career smoldered prior to his encounter with the Saints in Nauvoo. See Andrew F. Smith, *The Sainly Scoundrel: The Life and Times of Dr. John Cook Bennett* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). The author of this biography, being deeply interested in the tomato and its history, noticed that the notorious Bennett played a role in popularizing that vegetable (or fruit) and hence produced an account of his life. In addition, for Robert Matthias (aka the notorious phony Joshua the Jew), see Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *Kingdom of Matthias* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

remembered at all, they appear as bit players or spear carriers in Brother Joseph's story. Who would have even heard of Abner Cole (aka Obediah Dogberry), or Luman Walter (aka Walters the Magician) if their names had not been in some way associated with the Saints? But the memory of Brother Joseph lives on in the hearts and minds of millions of believers and a good many critics as well. This in itself is strange.

What initially set Joseph Smith apart from his contemporaries and generated much hostility toward him was gossip about his encounters with real messengers from another world. It was not, as some still insist, a brush in his youth with a bit of folk magic that generated both interest and hostility. Instead, animosity toward him in part resulted from his having parted company with those youthful associates mired in the world of treasure seeking. He was, as the first reports published in local newspapers make clear, being readied to recover what his enemies lampooned as a "Gold[en] Bible." Even prior to the publication of the Book of Mormon, news of his encounters with heavenly messengers outraged some of his secularized neighbors who were more or less in thrall to Enlightenment skepticism about divine things. And that news also provoked preachers of the then orthodox religion, who were eager to slam the door shut on any additional divine special revelations and who were also, despite protestations to the contrary, deeply enmeshed in theological quibbling and sectarian rivalry.

The first prattle in village newspapers provided garbled accounts of Joseph's conversations with beings from another world. The story he and his associates told clearly involved the recovery of the Book of Mormon. This is what initially got him into trouble with polite and not-so-polite society. Only later was he depicted by his enemies as deeply involved with magic and the occult. As mentioned, he was, much like others at the time, a seeker and a visionary. But he was far more. In addition to being assured by heavenly messengers that his sins were forgiven, he was a seer who eventually published a five-hundred-page book that he (and his close associates) affirmed had been made available to him by the gift and power of God. His message was not about magic circles or occult incantations or Captain Kidd's treasure, though he might have been familiar with such lore. Early

in his career, as Mark Ashurst-McGee argues, Joseph may have had to distinguish clearly between an occult and a fully prophetic way of telling his story.¹⁴ His enemies, both then and now, strive to find in the often confused tales of magic and the occult and lore about buried treasures some way of discrediting the Book of Mormon and Joseph’s prophetic messages.¹⁵

Divine Amnesty and the Need for Anamnesis

Through baptism, the Saints witness to God, to the community of Saints, and to themselves that they desire to become the children or seed of Christ. We thereby declare that we seek the only possible remedy for our sins—the redemption made by Jesus of Nazareth, whom we accept as our Redeemer and Lord. Since we live in a world beset with temptations and are vulnerable, we fall from grace. We must therefore repent and renew the covenants we have made with the Lord. Therefore, “it is expedient that the church meet together often to partake of bread and wine in remembrance of the Lord Jesus” (D&C 20:75).

We partake of the emblems of the sacrifice of Jesus “in remembrance . . . and witness” thereby that we “are willing to take upon” ourselves “the name of [the] Son, and always remember him and keep his commandments” (D&C 20:77). Remembering and keeping are not discrete things; we cannot do the one without striving to do the other.¹⁶ In all of

14. See Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 35–100.

15. When Abner Cole, in January 1830, prior to the publication of the Book of Mormon, included in his tabloid—without authorization—three portions of the Book of Mormon, Joseph objected. Cole sought vengeance by spreading tales about Joseph’s involvement in “magic” and “money digging.” Up to that point, what appeared in newspapers were garbled versions of the story of an angel and an ancient sacred text. Elsewhere I have told this story, stressing the crucial chronology of conflicting accounts. See Louis Midgley, “Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon? The Critics and Their Theories,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 101–39, at 107–8.

16. For an elaboration of this point, see Louis Midgley, “‘To Remember and Keep’: On the Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 95–137, at 110–24.

this we follow the words of Jesus at the last supper: “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19 NIV, or 1 Corinthians 11:24–25; cf. Moroni 4 and 5; D&C 20:77, 79). We thereby give public witness that we wish to be numbered among the children of the Messiah or Christ. By offering our sacraments to the Lord in a communal memorial meal, we signify our desire to be forgiven and to be fully sanctified and return to the presence of the Lord; we also seek the companionship of the Holy Spirit to guide and chasten us in our sojourn here below. The remembrance enjoined upon the Saints thus focuses on our need for redemption from spiritual death and mortality. It is that alone which seals us to God, reconciles us to him, and makes possible a divine amnesty. We are commanded to participate often in remembrance of the mighty redeeming deeds of Jesus of Nazareth on our behalf.

But this is not all; the revelations also require remembrance of other portentous portions of the past to help us, among other things, to overcome the amnesia otherwise found among those who, while still having a form of godliness, tend to deny the actual power of God here and now. Brother Joseph enlarged and expanded our memories by recovering historical accounts in which the divine was active in human affairs, thereby bidding us to enter into a world not unlike the one portrayed in the Book of Mormon. The Lord thereby beckons all to sing the song of redeeming love by entering into the enchanted and enchanting world described in our scriptures.¹⁷

Struggling to Know Brother Joseph Better

In an effort to supplement what I learned in conversations with my father and in church meetings, I read in my youth a biography of Joseph Smith written by John Henry Evans.¹⁸ I was, if I remember correctly, disappointed by the lack of citations to sources and by the slim store of materials that Evans drew upon. He was, however, an engaging writer. I read this biography of Joseph Smith, which I

17. For an elaboration of this point, see especially Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 209–39.

18. See John Henry Evans, *Joseph Smith: An American Prophet* (New York: Macmillan, 1933). It was subsequently reprinted several times.

borrowed from my father's library, to learn something about what had taken place during those fourteen brief years from the publication of the Book of Mormon to the point where, while in a little jail, he was lynched by a mob. I was impressed by the claim made by Evans that Joseph had assembled around him men of considerable intellectual capacity. I liked that idea. But I now see this as quite unfounded. I have come to believe that Joseph was not an especially gifted judge of character. Be that as it may, he had to make do with those who turned up, whatever their qualifications, or even, as it sometimes turned out, their lack of moral rectitude.

I noticed that Evans insisted that Joseph Smith was a mystic. I found this puzzling. I consulted another book in my father's library¹⁹ and eventually other books in other libraries. I discovered an extensive, confused, and confusing literature. I came to the conclusion that Joseph was not a mystic and that the Book of Mormon (and the story of its recovery) were not what one could find going on among those commonly considered Christian mystics. As I tried to sort out the claim that Joseph was a mystic, my understanding of him was deepened. I learned then when one is challenged by something written by friend or foe that this should be the impetus for further inquiry and reflection. So my advice to those troubled by something they find in any of the literature on Mormon origins is to look further into the things they find disquieting. They thereby may come to jettison some dogmatic ignorance and to understand Brother Joseph better. I learned at a very early age that my faith did not depend on some historical account, whether by friend or foe, but that I could learn from both.

What exactly did I learn about Joseph Smith when I found myself puzzled by Evans's opinion? He mentioned the surnames of several mystics, thus introducing me to some famous individuals. These included Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1327), a German mystic “who carried the idea of absorption in God almost into pantheism”;²⁰ Miguel

19. I still possess this book. See John Wright Buckham, “Mysticism,” in *An Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), 513–14. It is a dreadful book, but I still consult it for basic information.

20. Evans, *Joseph Smith*, 219.

Molinos (1640–92), a Spanish mystic “who advised abstinence, torture of the body, and total self-renunciation as the road to inner peace”²¹ (and who thereby got into trouble with the Spanish Inquisition); and Gerard Groot (1340–1380), a Dutch mystic “who put feeling above knowledge.”²² Joseph Smith, I believed, was radically unlike each of these.²³ Evans had his own list of ways in which Joseph Smith differed from those traditionally known as mystics. “Nevertheless,” according to Evans, “Joseph Smith was a mystic.”²⁴

Evans actually demonstrated how Joseph Smith differed from mystics and from devotional practices set out by mystics. Mystics typically describe brief, transitory experiences that follow long periods of meditation. By somehow blunting the consciousness of exterior events, mystics may experience a kind of union with that which is presumably timeless, immutable, changeless. The mystic thus seeks through intense meditative exercises (or with drugs) to reach an ecstatic union with what is beyond both time and space, as well as momentarily beyond the temporal flux of events. As Evans recognized, none of this describes Joseph Smith or the contents of the scriptures he made available. In addition, mystical experiences are ineffable—whatever they are, they simply cannot be described except through negations. “Joseph Smith, however, was a mystic,” Evans insisted, “though in a much deeper sense than the word implies.”²⁵ This is a strange sentence. What might constitute this deeper sense? “The heart of mysticism lies in the fact that the mystic sees the eternal in the temporal.”²⁶

21. Evans, *Joseph Smith*, 219; Evans mistakenly identified him as French.

22. Evans, *Joseph Smith*, 219. Groot may have written in his diary much of what was later to appear as *Of the Imitation of Christ*, a widely read devotional book, which was credited to Groot’s follower and biographer, Thomas à Kempis.

23. In addition to those mystics mentioned by Evans, I eventually consulted the studies of two famous Anglican advocates of Christian mysticism—W. R. Inge (1860–1954), and Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941), as well as Rufus M. Jones (1863–1948), an American Quaker scholar. I glanced at the writings of St. Teresa (1515–82) and St. John of the Cross (1542–91), both famous Spanish Discalced Carmelites, and Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), as well as Christian Platonists who seemed to be involved in one way or another in mysticism. I started collecting secondary literature on mysticism and mystical theology.

24. Evans, *Joseph Smith*, 219.

25. Evans, *Joseph Smith*, 220.

26. Evans, *Joseph Smith*, 220.

And, Evans added, “no matter whether the mystic be ancient or modern, Oriental or Western, this is true of him, if he be a true mystic and not a fraud.”²⁷ This is nonsense. Neither the Book of Mormon nor Joseph Smith provides instructions on how to achieve an absorption or union with a timeless eternal through meditative practices.

Now, looking back, I think I have figured out why Evans insisted on labeling Joseph Smith a mystic despite all the evidence he was aware of that this was sheer nonsense. It was for exactly the same reasons that others, including Leonard Arrington (1917–99), did the same thing.²⁸ Since mystics are quite typically respected or at least not reviled, it was hoped that a potentially hostile audience could somehow be charmed into giving Joseph a more respectful hearing by using language to describe him that the authors realized did not apply to him at all. This ploy seems laudable, even though it involved an essentially inaccurate portrayal of Joseph Smith. There is in principle nothing wrong with tacking to reach a desirable goal, although it involves the risk of confusing ourselves and others about what we really believe.

What I thought I had discovered about mystics and mysticism was reinforced by Hugh Nibley (1910–2005) in 1954.²⁹ He also made a radical distinction between prophets and mystics. In addition, he argued that mystical experiences—which can be found outside of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim lands—are probably real. But unlike the encounters of seers and prophets with heavenly messengers, what mystics experience is generated by disciplined meditation (or so-called spiritual exercises), or it may even be induced by drugs. Such explanations

27. Evans, *Joseph Smith*, 220.

28. Until I could examine Leonard Arrington’s notes on mysticism (now available in his papers at Utah State University), I wondered if he might have wrongly believed that Joseph Smith was a mystic. He did not; there is evidence that he was familiar with at least some of the reasons this simply could not be true. He was, like others, struggling to find a way of reducing some of the hostility toward Joseph Smith common in intellectual and other circles. He wanted Joseph to get a more respectful hearing. Apparently he believed, much like John Henry Evans, that by labeling Joseph a mystic, some might be led to listen.

29. See Hugh Nibley, “Prophets and Mystics,” in *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 98–107. The materials for this book were first published in 1954 and then in a slightly expanded version in 1962.

and experimentations have not, at least to this point, become popular with Latter-day Saints. We should keep in mind that the encounters of seers with the divine and whatever it is that mystics experience are poles apart.

What I believe to be the vital historical content of Christian faith in the past has been, in some instances, supplanted by subtle notions of ahistorical mystical intuition. A momentary feeling of ecstasy in which individual identity is thought to have disappeared has thus been made to replace the prophetic gifts, which clearly do not require a retreat from the sensible world. Something one can manage on one's own through rigorous meditative exercises is substituted for what are wrongly believed to be crude stories of encounters with heavenly messengers.³⁰ In Christian circles this has been going on for centuries.

Challenges to the possibility of genuine encounters with God have been around for a long time. Such understandings are consonant with the notion that charismatic gifts ceased with the death of the apostles. But the Book of Mormon clearly challenges that notion. The malaise I have in mind tends to impact all historically grounded faiths. I will focus on one account and therefore will not attempt to be exhaustive—merely suggestive.

Outmoded Beliefs That “Belong to the Past”

According to John Macquarrie, “Moses and the elders are said to have seen God directly on the summit of Mount Sinai,” and those “primitives” actually expected to find signs of an active God, including even sensible demonstrations flowing from reception of (or in support of) the prophetic message.³¹ How could this be? Macquarrie notes that

the great religions arose at a time when the world was still supposed to be filled with divine manifestations, and these could

30. For one recent effort to explain and justify this, see Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Aquili, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001). For additional details, see the book note in *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 437–38.

31. See John Macquarrie, *God-Talk: An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 20.

be plainly pointed out. Theophanies took place—or so it was believed—and even when the gods did not appear in person, they might manifest themselves in sensible effects which, since they could not be understood in any other way, were assigned to divine agency.³²

He reassures his readers that “these ways of arguing belong to the past. The world nowadays has become for *us* a non-religious secularized environment, a self-regulating cosmos in which *we* have learned to describe the events that take place within it in terms of other events that are equally immanent in the world.”³³

The *us* and *we* mentioned by Macquarrie would seem to identify those Christians who have adopted some skeptical, secular ideology. The result is a disenchanting “secularized environment” from which older ways of apprehending the divine are excluded. Macquarrie struggles to find some way of preserving at least the rudiments of what he calls “God-talk.” He does not brush all of it aside as delusion or as a comforting illusion, but much of it is treated as a quaint mythology. The result, again according to Macquarrie, is that “we no longer look for sensible manifestations of the divine, whether they be theophanies, miracles, signs from heaven, or angelic interventions.”³⁴ From this perspective, it would not be the Bible that rules out the Book of Mormon but a way of reading it that ends up excluding what appear to be historical elements in the Bible as merely mythical or legendary. The *we* who “no longer” countenance such things find no need for comforting illusions since *we* have risen above such nonsense by learning to rely on reason and science both for explanations and to overcome the terrors of a hard, indifferent world. Critics mocked Joseph Smith in village newspapers from the perspective of a secular fundamentalism but also from a religious perspective not entirely unlike that set forth by Macquarrie. Joseph thus faced ridicule from those already influenced by an even then fashionable skepticism about divine things.

32. Macquarrie, *God-Talk*, 19–20.

33. Macquarrie, *God-Talk*, 21, emphasis added.

34. Macquarrie, *God-Talk*, 21.

The *we* in Macquarrie's assertion includes those who have abandoned what they consider an outmoded, naive faith as the source of much misery and fear. As Macquarrie explains it,

the archaic naive ways of talking about the gods came to be criticized. Gradually the gods themselves were withdrawn from the realm of the sensible, though they might still be considered to produce sensible effects. However, it might happen, as *in mystical religion all over the world, that attention was directed away from sense-experience altogether*. In any case, new ways of talking were demanded, and as soon as men began to depart from the mythical mentality which thought that the gods and their doings showed themselves as sensible phenomena, religious teachers became aware of the difficulty of talking about the gods at all.³⁵

Elsewhere, Macquarrie points out that when one jettisons what are, from his perspective, the mythological and legendary, then one may have “discovered the essential message of the New Testament, if only we can find the key to interpret it. The first step towards a right interpretation is to ask the right question. The question is not, ‘What happened?’ but ‘What does this mean for my existence?’” He adds that, for him, “a religious document is not primarily a history book, though of course it may contain some history.” Instead of providing access to anything like a genuine past where, for example, Jesus of Nazareth—the Messiah or Christ—suffered and then was killed as a sacrifice and later resurrected, the New Testament, according to Macquarrie, is “concerned . . . with the enhancement of life, with setting before the reader a new possibility of existence.”³⁶ Macquarrie, at the end of his career, invested two years of his life in reviewing much of the literature on mystical theology and mysticism. Though not himself a mystic, he is very sympathetic with mystical theology. One reason is that the experiences reported by mystics, since they are

35. Macquarrie, *God-Talk*, 22, emphasis added.

36. See John Macquarrie, *On Being a Theologian: Reflections at Eighty*, ed. John H. Morgan (London: SCM Press, 1999), 135.

essentially ineffable, do not contain much in the way of content other than a feeling of union with the Infinite, Whole, or Absolute. Instead they involve self-knowledge or inwardness, or an internal journey. They are best expressed in negative theology, where one can say only what is not there, what the divine is not like, and so forth.³⁷

Macquarrie works his way through an intellectual milieu heavily influenced by a version of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment skepticism about divine things. At least in intellectual circles, this ideology has, as is well-known, managed to erode or shove aside all faith with historical content and grounding that rests on divine special revelations. But this so-called flight of the gods (or death of God) did not happen in an instant; it has taken place rather gradually. Increasingly, since World War II, it has moved from the margins to permeate the very fabric of European society. This is less true in America, except perhaps in intellectual circles where it is manifested in the denial that deity could possibly affect either history or nature and then in the disavowal that there have ever been (or ever could be) theophanies or genuine divine special revelations.

In Macquarrie's assertions one finds portions of the comforting illusions entertained by those former Saints who have somehow become entangled in fashionable, essentially secular modes of thought. The corrosive strands of modernity should not be ignored or minimized. In addition, they seem to me to be much more intellectually interesting than the onslaught by countercult critics or by somewhat more reasonable evangelical efforts to counter what they see as the challenge posed by the Church of Jesus Christ.

Peeking at the Abyss of Myth

There is a long history of attempts by seemingly pious people to deliteralize (or, more recently, to demythologize) the scriptures. Beginning in Germany in the early 1800s, biblical scholars (as well as theologians) entered into what might be described as Myth Alley,

37. See John Macquarrie, *Two Worlds Are Ours: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005).

where they set up residence. By the time Brother Joseph appeared on the scene, scholars were busy crafting ingenious and sophisticated theories in the hope of finding some way of salvaging what they presumed was a kernel of “truth” clothed in the garment of what appeared to be fantastic historical accounts. They claimed that the New Testament, for example, was written by those immersed in crude mythological ways of picturing divine things. Something like this seems to be behind Macquarrie’s observations. At the close of World War II, Rudolf Bultmann (1892–1976) began to purge (that is, demythologize) their habitation. But this was not the only or the first effort made to remove the divine from all historical events. Some of the most sophisticated literature of antiquity, as well as much contemporary theology, even in some rather strictly conservative Protestant circles, is an attempt to find ways of avoiding such presumably crude and unacceptable modes of speech when dealing with God.

Various ingenious ways have been sought to jettison or radically reinterpret the presumably scandalous language and narratives found in the Bible. Flying directly in the face of all this, Brother Joseph’s first public acts herald interviews with messengers from another world. Joseph was, in Charles Dickens’s mocking language, “seeing visions in the age of railways.”³⁸ Such a thing was simply incredible to those enamored of the modern world. And, as if this were not enough, Brother Joseph told a strange story about a history, inscribed upon metal plates, of previously unknown peoples. He then offered an English version of this record. The Book of Mormon tells of a people who moved from Palestine to somewhere in the New World who sometimes dealt with heavenly messengers and whose writings contain messages of crucial importance for all peoples. All such things had presumably been ruled out in the post-Enlightenment world. To accept those modern

38. Charles Dickens, “In the Name of the Prophet—Smith!” *Household Words* 69 (19 July 1851): 385. Dickens’s remarks are a crucial indication of how the Saints were seen by educated people. As is well-known, he was very favorably impressed by the Mormons he saw in both America and England, but one thing about them he could not tolerate: “What the Mormons do,” he wrote in 1851, “seems to be excellent; what they *say* is mostly nonsense” because “it exhibits fanaticism in its newest garb,” namely “seeing visions in the age of railways.”

assumptions requires a flat rejection of the faith of the Saints. There is simply no way of getting around this. From the very beginning, Joseph's prophetic claims were unacceptable to secularized intellectuals as well as to Christians influenced by Enlightenment suspicions of superstitious, frenzied, overwrought fanaticism.

Brother Joseph's own manner of speaking of his divine special revelations, the scope and frequency of them, the claims made on their behalf, and the close involvement of others in his encounters with the divine all make his story a thing apart from the usual piety of sincere, well-meaning, and earnest believers. He gave accounts of his visits or interviews with messengers from another world, and he also provided an English translation of his angel-revealed ancient record (and eventually other ancient texts). In doing this, he outraged both skeptical and pious people. He was eventually silenced by a lynch mob. It is sometimes difficult for the naive or cloistered Saint to comprehend the obstacles Joseph's story faces when it confronts the tastes and prejudices of either the secularized or sectarian worlds. Skeptics find it difficult to put aside the lens through which they peer at the strangeness of Joseph's work. It should be noted that the preconceptions and background assumptions of his critics are often enshrined in hoary traditions, sustained by the weight of fashionable learning, while also serving powerful institutional interests.

From Macquarrie's perspective, theophanies, angelic visitations, visions, prophetic revelations, or other manifestations of the divine belong to the primitive and outmoded past. Thus, from the perspective of secularized modernity, the temporally remote mentality in which the "great religions arose" has been superseded by the speculation of scholars with carefully reasoned and coherently argued explanations that wipe away primitive beliefs about the possible presence of the divine in the world. Secular foot soldiers march forward with ideologies that yield or advance such conclusions. When confronted with dogmas that have become the touchstone of the modern world, the Saints face very difficult choices. It is no wonder that some can find no truly satisfactory solution to what may seem to be puzzling paradoxes and unanswered or unanswerable questions.

Some internal conflict and even bad faith is generated within the hearts and minds of those who begin to sense the charms and hear the siren summons of the dominant secular ideology. My experience tells me that there are few who have not had a brush with such allurements. Unfortunately, for some of the Saints the solution to these quandaries has been to assume that their traditional faith rests on the sand of false stories about revelations and is therefore merely at best a charming delusion—one not unlike other primitive or even sophisticated efforts to ascribe some measure of meaning to what is going on here below. But even if that is not the path taken, the troubled one must find a way to come to terms with what may seem to be conflicts between secular accounts she has encountered and the content of her faith. There are, of course, some attempts to deal with these crucial issues; these deserve careful scrutiny. We have made an effort to offer some of these in this number of the *FARMS Review*.

One good place to examine the clash between the dominant secular ideology and the faith of the Saints is in the writings of Latter-day Saint historians. (A similar and related dynamic can be found in other academic disciplines.) These writings deserve close attention because we have the task of telling the story of Mormon things to Saint and Gentile alike. Much depends upon which explanations we employ and whose standards we invoke. Each of our various audiences has different expectations and standards and makes different and often conflicting demands. Consequently, we must make choices between sometimes competing ways in which to tell our story. These choices include the plot we advance and also the preconceptions, categories, vocabulary, assumptions, and explanations we choose to employ. At the same time we have a choice of the reference group or audience to which our work is addressed and whose standards it is intended to satisfy. The history manufactured by those caught in the confrontation between the glamorous secular world and the faith stemming from Joseph Smith will necessarily reflect the manner and degree in which that struggle has been resolved by the historian.

A Fault or Weakness of the Faith?

During my lifetime there have been more and more dissidents and cultural Mormons who insist that the church should abandon the traditional historical ground and content of faith. Why, one might ask, would such a shift be desirable or even possible? The reason, according to my esteemed former teacher, the late Sterling McMurrin (1914–96), former professor of history, bureaucrat, and administrator at the University of Utah, is that an objective scrutiny of the foundations of the faith discloses “a good many unsavory things.”³⁹ What did McMurrin include in this category? Heading his list of “unseemly” features in Mormon history was the story Joseph Smith told about his visits with messengers from another world. The Book of Mormon, McMurrin insisted, is not an authentic ancient history and Joseph’s story is preposterous—he was not a genuine prophet and certainly not a seer.

McMurrin charged “that the Church has intentionally distorted its own history by dealing fast and loose with historical data and imposing theological and religious interpretations on those data that are entirely unwarranted.”⁴⁰ He insisted that

in the case of Mormonism, the faith is so mixed up with so many commitments to historical events—or to events that are purported to be historical—that a competent study of history can be very disillusioning. Mormonism is a historically oriented religion. To a remarkable degree, the Church has concealed much of its history from its people, while at the same time causing them to tie their religious faith to its own controlled interpretations of its history.⁴¹

The problem then, as McMurrin saw it, is a “fault of the weakness of the faith,” which he believed should not be tied at all to any purported

39. “An Interview with Sterling McMurrin,” *Dialogue* 17/1 (1984): 18–43, at 21. This interview, conducted by Blake Ostler, was also published in *Free Inquiry* 4/1 (1983/84): 32–34. Pagination is from the *Dialogue* version.

40. “Interview with Sterling McMurrin,” 22.

41. “Interview with Sterling McMurrin,” 20.

historical events.⁴² Faith should be, he insisted, in man (whatever that might mean)⁴³ and not in God and most certainly should not involve purported theophanies and divine special revelations.⁴⁴ McMurrin did little if any actual probing of the Mormon past. Without more than glancing at it, he rejected the Book of Mormon both as history and as prophetic witness.⁴⁵ When I was his student in the 1950s, McMurrin was captivated by Dale L. Morgan. It was from McMurrin that I heard tales of Morgan's mastery of Mormon history and that he was then busy sorting out what really happened. What McMurrin and others did not realize is that Morgan's mischievous project hit a series of snags and ended in misfortune.⁴⁶

42. "Interview with Sterling McMurrin," 20.

43. See Louis Midgley, "Atheists and Cultural Mormons Promote a Naturalistic Humanism," *FARMS Review* 7/1 (1995): 229–97, at 277–94. And see Ted Vaggalis, "The Gospel and the Captive Woman," in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 265–90.

44. See Sterling M. McMurrin and L. Jackson Newell, *Matters of Conscience: Conversations with Sterling M. McMurrin on Philosophy, Education, and Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996). "Religion," McMurrin insisted, should "inspire men with faith in themselves." So it seems that he wanted us to place our faith in ourselves or perhaps in an idealized version of ourselves, and not in God. We presumably need not consider ourselves in need of the gifts that only God can possibly provide. We are, both individually and collectively, the masters of our destiny. Having reduced faith to concern rather than trust, McMurrin could then simply ignore the divine and focus his attention, instead, on how humans have either optimistically or pessimistically assessed their own excellence and worth. See Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Patterns of Our Religious Faiths* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1954), reprinted under the title "The Primary Forms of Religion in Judaeo-Christian Culture," in *Religion, Reason, and Truth: Historical Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1982), 83–112, at 112. Some, but not all, of McMurrin's papers were included in his *Religion, Reason, and Truth*, and others were published posthumously in McMurrin, *Lectures on Religion and Culture* (Salt Lake City: Tanner Humanities Center, 2004). See Vaggalis, "The Gospel and the Captive Woman," 265–90.

45. See L. Jackson Newell, "Remembering Sterling McMurrin," *Sunstone*, September 1996, 10–11.

46. See Gary F. Novak, "'The Most Convenient Form of Error': Dale Morgan on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon," *FARMS Review of Books* 8/1 (1996): 122–67; and Craig L. Foster, "Madelaine McQuown, Dale Morgan, and the Great Unfinished Brigham Young Biography," *Dialogue* 31/2 (1998): 111–23. Much less candid accounts of Morgan's career, perhaps intended to salvage something of his critical stance, have appeared. These border on hagiography. See, for example, Richard Saunders, "'The Strange Mixture of Intellect': A Social History of Dale L. Morgan, 1933–42," *Dialogue* 28/4 (1995): 39–58; and the glowing but cleansed account of Morgan in Gary Topping's *Utah Historians and*

A history of the Mormon past that followed the program set out by McMurrin would be a genuinely new kind of Mormon history; gone would be the angels, the plates, as well as all the divine special revelations. They might not exactly disappear; they are, after all, part of the textual record. It would be dishonest to leave them out simply because one happens not to believe them. Some way of handling them would have to be devised as well as a way to justify that procedure. Since the prophetic truth claims cannot be ignored and since they cannot be accepted as simply true by the historian, according to McMurrin, some method must be found to explain them away. All the presumably “unsavory things” would be radically reinterpreted through the employment of what McMurrin and many others describe as “naturalistic” explanations. The claim “that you don’t get books from angels and translate them by miracles”⁴⁷ flows from such preconceptions and the explanations they frame. Since the Book of Mormon purports to be an ancient history and the acceptance of that claim is the ground upon which the church stands, a radical reordering must follow a program such as McMurrin recommended.

A “Great Divide”

I have argued elsewhere that, when we encounter Joseph Smith, we are faced with a clear choice—he either was or was not a genuine prophet; between these alternatives there is no middle ground.⁴⁸

the Reconstruction of Western History (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 113–73.

47. “Interview with Sterling McMurrin,” 25.

48. See Louis Midgley, “The Challenge of Historical Consciousness: Mormon History and the Encounter with Secular Modernity,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:502–51; Midgley, “The Acids of Modernity and the Crisis in Mormon Historiography,” in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 189–225; Midgley, “The Current Battle over the Book of Mormon: Is Modernity Itself Somehow Canonical?” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 200–254; Midgley, “No Middle Ground: The Debate over the Authenticity of the Book of Mormon,” in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 149–70; Midgley, “Faulty Topography,” *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1–2 (2002): 139–92, at 155–60.

(This does not exclude the possibility of there being a middle ground on numerous other issues.) The accounts fashioned on either side of this fundamental barrier range widely in quality in whatever way one measures such things. Some defenses of the faith are unsatisfactory, while others are much more coherently and competently done. And the same is true of efforts to deny that Joseph was a genuine prophet and to provide a naturalistic account for the Book of Mormon.

D. Michael Quinn also claims “that there is a ‘Great Divide’ in Mormon studies between historians who believe that Joseph Smith was ‘a genuine prophet’ (as Smith defined himself) and those who do not.”⁴⁹ I am pleased to have Quinn, who is celebrated for his caustic criticisms of those with whom he disagrees, indicate that, on the issue of whether the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text and Joseph Smith a genuine prophet, he agrees that the historian is confronted with an either-or decision. However, Quinn is too restrictive in identifying who must make this decision since it is faced not only by historians writing about Mormon origins but by everyone who encounters the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith. Quinn borrowed the label “Great Divide” from me, and I borrowed it from Dale L. Morgan, who flatly rejected Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims and thought that the Book of Mormon was merely “frontier fiction.”⁵⁰ Morgan made it clear that he was emphatically on the nonprophet side of what he described as a “Great Divide.” He opined as follows:

I believe I have about as great a reasonableness of spirit as anyone who has made inquiries in Mormon history. But I am aware also of a fatal defect in my objectivity. It is an objectivity on one side only of a philosophical Great Divide. With my point of view on God, I am incapable of accepting the claims of Joseph Smith and the Mormons, be they however

49. See D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, rev. and enl. ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 352 n. 98.

50. Morgan uses this expression in a letter to Bernard DeVoto, dated 20 December 1945, which is reproduced in John Phillip Walker, ed., *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 92–101, at 93.

so convincing. If God does not exist, how can Joseph Smith's story have any possible validity? I will look everywhere for explanations except to the ONE explanation that is the position of the church.⁵¹

Morgan ruled out in advance the possibility that Joseph Smith was a prophet because he had found no proof for the reality of God. (He wanted proof before faith, but we all should realize that we will never enjoy the fruit of the tree of life unless we nurture the seed of faith that eventually yields knowledge.) "Essentially my views are atheist," Morgan wrote, "but I call myself an agnostic because I regard professing atheists as being as much deluded as professing theists."⁵² He boasted that he had "no personal belief in God and [could] see no necessity for the existence of such a being; I say further that I think that this is the only life we'll ever have, and that we'd better make the most of it."⁵³ He seems not to have discovered any necessary purpose or meaning for anything, other than his inchoate notion of making "the most of it," whatever that might mean. However, quite unlike some of the current critics, Morgan seems to me to have been rather irenic, as well as having been concerned about clarity and candor. These are virtues unfortunately not always present among dissidents and cultural Mormon critics of the church.

Faith understood as trust in God's mighty and merciful acts on our behalf, both in the past and in our own situation, is clearly not something inherited or merely cultural; it involves a decision, a fate-

51. This language is found in a letter written by Morgan to Juanita Brooks on 15 December 1945. See Walker, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 84–91, at 87. (Gary Novak deserves credit for noticing this candid confession.) Morgan thought that his atheism constituted a "fatal defect" in his objectivity as a historian. Quinn pictures himself as "functionally objective," whatever that might mean. He also wants to be seen as a believer. But, while insisting that he is an honest apologist, he flaunts his troubled relationship with the community of Saints. He is abrasive with those who do not celebrate his brand of revisionist history. His opinions on these matters are strewn throughout *Early Mormonism*. In addition, he does not seem to have worked out a coherent explanation of his history, personal or otherwise, that would constitute a defense rather than merely a slightly veiled attack on the faith of the Saints.

52. Walker, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 87.

53. Walker, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 87.

ful choice between alternatives. I am therefore fond of the idea that historians (as well as believers generally) face a “Great Divide”—an either-or decision—when they confront Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. This explains why the controversy over the Mormon past continues now as it has in the past.

The Norms of a “New” History

It is often said that the historian should discover the plot—the facts should be allowed to speak their truth through them as detached, neutral, honest observers of the past. Those who crave the truth about the past should not begin with a theory, conclusions ought to flow from the evidence, one’s faith should not enter into the stories told, the historian should never be an advocate or partisan, and so forth. We also hear it said that the historian cannot, of course, ever actually achieve full objectivity. Instead, while historians continue to see objectivity as a worthy ideal—as desirable and necessary for arriving at an understanding of what really happened—they recognize that it is difficult and perhaps even impossible to rid oneself of all preconceptions, hopes and fears, biases, desires, and preferences. But this remains an end worthy of sacrifice and earnest striving. Complete objectivity is thus not possible in either the historian or in her history. It is, however, a goal of sophisticated, professional history.

With this powerful professional ethos in place, some Latter-day Saints have unfortunately been enticed into believing that by striving for objectivity, including a detachment from their own faith, they have managed to rise above a defective, defensive Old Mormon History and have thereby found a way to contribute to a superior, open, and honest New Mormon History. These labels, or surrogates, have taken their place in the way Mormon historiography is currently described and debated. Sometimes the battle is described as being between what is calumniated as a Faith-Promoting History (or, often, “faithful history”) and a heroic Revisionist History.

For twenty-five years I have argued that it is a grave mistake for Latter-day Saint historians to adopt the ideology of objectivity and to

assume that it grounds a proper historical methodology;⁵⁴ I also flatly reject the cozy, self-serving distinction between a retrograde traditional history and a fancy new history that either leaves out the divine because historians presumably cannot talk about such things⁵⁵ or that explains away the crucial founding theophanies and divine special revelations as mere instances of outright fraud or as delusion or illusion. I have remonstrated over what I believe is the confusion about the need for objectivity, detachment, or balance when one writes about the Mormon past. The notion of objective historians and objective history needs to be debunked because it is bunkum.

I recently described what it was that led me to reject the idea of objective history and objective historians. I explained that in the ignorance of youth I was fascinated and challenged by the writings of Bultmann, then an influential and highly controversial German student of the Bible who had undertaken to demythologize the legends and mythological worldview found in the New Testament. From Bultmann, I was soon led

to the literature on the interpretation of texts—that is, to what is often called hermeneutics. I came to see that the way we tell stories about the past depends upon how we read texts. I discovered that how we read (and hence understand or explain the meaning of what we find in texts), what we select in the texts we consult or for which we search, and also what we will allow within what we consider the realm of reality depend upon the assumptions and the interpretation we bring to that task or somehow eventually adopt. The historian provides the plot, and so the story always necessarily has a political motivation and setting. I also began to see that the categories and distinctions we frequently take for granted have their own

54. Larry Morris, in “Joseph Smith and ‘Interpretive Biography,’” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 321–74, has sorted out some of the more serious methodological mistakes made by Dan Vogel in his recent attempt to fashion a naturalistic (and essentially psychohistorical) explanation of Joseph Smith. Many of Vogel’s problems, as Morris shows, rest on an implicit and hence uncritically accepted historical objectivism.

55. See the essays listed in note 48 above.

often convoluted history. From that point on, all talk of balanced, neutral, detached, disinterested, objective historians and their vaunted histories became for me problematic.⁵⁶

In 1980, when I began to examine how Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon were being dealt with by some (but certainly not all) Mormon historians, I noticed that there was an appeal, in one form or another, to objectivity. Talk about objective history, as well as some of what was being written, was disconcerting. I tried to figure out the role the idea of objectivity played in the history then being produced by a couple of historians. When I complained about what I surmised was going on in appeals for an objective history or the need for objective historians, I was lambasted by those who, in different ways, staunchly insisted on so-called objective accounts of the Mormon past—for an ordinary history written for tough-minded intellectuals that was contrasted with a sentimental “sacred history” intended for the tender-hearted Saints.

Quinn linked me with Elder Boyd K. Packer—who ranks right there next to those (even remotely) associated with FARMS—as one insisting on “faith promoting history.” Quinn interpreted my remarks as a call for a history that was not “fair and objective”⁵⁷ or, in other words, for dishonest, incompetent, sanitized, retrograde Old Mormon History. Quinn also insisted that Elder Packer had called for a history that evades or denies the truth about what really happened in the Mormon past.⁵⁸ In response to the argument that some historians writing about the Mormon past “have adopted the assumptions of secular scholarship”⁵⁹ and that, by doing so, they advance entirely naturalistic explanations of the crucial founding theophanies and revelations, including the Book of Mormon, Quinn insisted that “there is nothing subversive about interpreting these developments from different

56. See Louis Midgley, “A Mighty Kauri Has Fallen: Hugh Winder Nibley (1910–2005),” *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): 337–54, at 346–47.

57. This is D. Michael Quinn’s language. See his “On Being a Mormon Historian (And Its Aftermath),” in *Faithful History*, 72, cf. 84, 88 (where Quinn attacks Elder Packer).

58. I have previously dealt with these matters in “Faulty Topography,” 174–77.

59. Quinn, “On Being a Mormon Historian,” 79.

points of view, even from perspectives of secular disciplines.”⁶⁰ It was easy, though, to demonstrate how this kind of history tended to explain away the historical grounds and content of Latter-day Saint faith as either an illusion or a delusion. Quinn did not deny that historians were advancing naturalistic explanations intended to explain away the presence of the divine in the Mormon past, nor did he seem to object to this being done. This may help explain why he does not growl when anti-Mormons cite his writings, which they regularly do, as justifications for their rejection of the faith of the Saints. In addition, to defend the faith would turn his efforts into what he thinks of as an unseemly polemic by compromising his vaunted “functional objectivity.”⁶¹

Here is another example of the kind of reaction I received:

A recent and spirited exchange on the alleged conflict between faith and history as it relates to Mormonism occurred at the 1981 meeting of the Western History Association in San Antonio, Texas. Louis Midgley, a political scientist at BYU, read a draft of the first chapter of his manuscript entitled “No Middle Ground,” in which he declared that LDS historians should not attempt to be detached or objective but should be “defenders of the faith.” Midgley maintains that one must either accept Joseph Smith as a prophet or reject him as a fraud. To explain any of Joseph Smith’s revelations or teachings as in part products of his culture “is an act of treason.”⁶²

This account is rather garbled. I had argued that it is a mistake—even treason—for a faithful Saint to explain away the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims as mere products of a

60. Quinn, “On Being a Mormon Historian,” 80.

61. Of course, Quinn is, when it suits his purposes, a partisan, and his writings are polemical and didactic. One particularly glaring instance is his notorious sex book, *Same-Sex Dynamics among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), reviewed by Klaus J. Hansen in “Quinn speak,” *FARMS Review of Books* 10/1 (1998): 132–40; and by George L. Mitton and Rhett S. James in “A Response to D. Michael Quinn’s Homosexual Distortion of Latter-day Saint History,” *FARMS Review of Books* 10/1 (1998): 141–263.

62. James L. Clayton, “Does History Undermine Faith?” *Sunstone*, March–April 1982, 33.

superstitious village magician, as the work of a mythmaker (even if he is called a “genius”), or as a mere mystical intuition. I did not, however, argue that the one and only “not-prophet” explanation was that Brother Joseph was a conscious fraud—clearly there are several other possible explanations that critics have advanced. Those who deny that Brother Joseph was a genuine prophet have, for example, striven to picture him as driven by primitive illusions or delusions, as deeply superstitious, or as mad. They have also mixed and matched these explanations into several convoluted combinations. Fraud is thus only one possible counterexplanation. I had, of course, also urged faithful Latter-day Saint historians to defend their faith as well as they can against these attacks. In addition, I had offered a spirited criticism of the deeply flawed historical objectivism upon which not-prophet explanations are made to rest.

Jan Shippo responded to my remonstrances by defending her friends—whom she described as “professional historians—to whom sophisticated methodology and objective history are not dirty words.”⁶³ In subsequent conversations with her, she has indicated that she is no longer committed to talking about objective historians and objective history. Since I doubt that I persuaded her, what exactly might it have been that led her to turn against the tide and reject the idea that historians either can or should be objective? It was probably the publication of a remarkable book and the conversation it incited.

The “Myth of Objectivity” Revisited—and Demythologized

In 1988, Peter Novick, a history professor at the University of Chicago, published a full-scale examination of the idea of objectivity among American historians.⁶⁴ Attentive readers will have noticed that Novick’s remarkable survey of the objectivist consciousness has

63. Jan Shippo, “The Mormon Past: Revealed or Revisited?” *Sunstone*, November–December 1981, 55–57, at 57. Additional remarks given in her presentation at the Western History conference in San Antonio (15–17 October 1981) were aimed at me but were not included in the published version.

64. See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

often been cited in the *FARMS Review*. There are many reasons for this. Among other things, Novick removes the crippling notion that, when the Saints write about the Mormon past, they should not defend the faith, that faith somehow gets in the way of doing sound history, or that they should not write as advocates for the community of Saints. Novick casts his examination of the flawed logic of what he calls the “myth of objectivity” in the form of an account of the ups and downs of that idea among those who have for the past hundred years written history in America. His story begins with the first professional historians and ends in the 1980s.

Novick has published three books. The first, *The Resistance versus Vichy*,⁶⁵ was drawn from his doctoral dissertation. I have not read this book. But I have read his other two, both of which are exceptional. In his latest book, which I highly recommend, Novick examines the radical shifts that have taken place among Jewish Americans in their understanding of the killing of Jews under the Hitler regime during World War II (which events have come to be known as the Holocaust).⁶⁶ This remarkable book is well worth serious attention. Just over a decade earlier, Novick published *That Noble Dream*. It is, among other things, by far the best account currently available of the American history profession.⁶⁷ Novick tells a story, and he has a plot, which focuses on what led historians to believe, and then to insist, that they could or should write objective history—or, in the words of Leopold von Ranke (as misunderstood by Americans) that they could somehow tell the story of the past “*wie es eigentlich gewesen [war]*” (“as it really was”) if and only if they were objective. Novick surveys the appeals to and the controversy over objectivity among historians; he focuses on the place in the hearts and minds of historians of the demand for objectivity, which, he shows, has been, in its various con-

65. Peter Novick, *The Resistance versus Vichy: The Purge of Collaborators in Liberated France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).

66. See Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

67. For an earlier and more conventional account not focused on the objectivity question, see John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

figurations and with ups and downs, the myth controlling the rhetoric, if not the actual practice, of the bulk of professional historians. *That Noble Dream* is a richly detailed, cogently reasoned investigation into what was, until recently, the controlling ideology of most professional historians.

Notwithstanding the seeming plausibility of the master image at work in the minds of historians, Novick shows that they cannot possibly achieve objectivity either in themselves or in the history they produce; objectivity is simply an impossible dream. He exposes the underlying conceptual confusion in what he insists is a mischievous myth. In addition, whatever heroic endeavors the myth inspires, it also generates much self-deception and blatant hypocrisy as historians muddle along under various versions of a professional mystique. He also demonstrates that, at times, while parading under the banner of objectivity, historians have been partisan ideologues.

Both Novick's book and various commentaries on it are readily available.⁶⁸ I will therefore not summarize the argument set out in *That Noble Dream*. Instead, I will quote and summarize portions of a paper Novick read at a Sunstone conference in Salt Lake City a year following the publication of *That Noble Dream*. In that address he examined the place of the myth of objectivity in the fledgling Mormon history profession.⁶⁹ How did Novick end up in Salt Lake? Signature Books operated a book club in 1988 and offered Novick's book for sale. Since the objectivist consciousness that has charmed some Mormon historians has sometimes ended up cutting out the heart of their faith,

68. For example, see Louis Midgley, "The Myth of Objectivity: Some Lessons for Latter-day Saints," *Sunstone*, August 1990, 54–56; and Midgley, review of *That Noble Dream*, by Peter Novick, *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 10 (1990): 102–4. For a criticism (consistent with Novick's findings) of D. Michael Quinn's thin version of the myth (which Quinn labels "functional objectivity"), see Midgley, review of *The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past*, ed. D. Michael Quinn, *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 13 (1993): 118–21, at 119.

69. See Peter Novick, "Why the Old Mormon Historians Are More Objective Than the New," a talk delivered at the 1989 Sunstone Symposium held at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. FARMS purchased a tape of this talk (SL89096), which is still available from the Sunstone Web site, www.sunstoneonline.com (accessed 26 June 2006). One can also download a free MP3 version from the same site.

someone at Signature Books may have thought that Novick's book provided a vindication of objectivity. Those then running Sunstone may have thought the same thing. Be that as it may, they invited him to examine recent Mormon historiography and then to apply his views on objectivity to the Latter-day Saint scene. Someone from Sunstone sent Novick a packet of essays to assist him in preparing his paper. What Novick consulted demonstrated that Mormon historians were not immune to either the charms or the confusion embedded in the myth of objectivity.

When I heard that Novick had been invited to read a paper at the Sunstone convention, I also sent him some essays, one in which the idea of objectivity was challenged and also one in which striving for objectivity was shown to result in a history that undercuts the faith of the Saints or that was used to justify such endeavors. His talk went unmentioned in *Sunstone*. A recording of his talk has circulated, as have two transcripts of his remarks.

During his address, Novick announced what he called his full title: "Why the Old Mormon Historians (according to a definition of objectivity, which is not the one you are used to, but which is much more coherent than the customary one) Are More Objective Than the New (then here comes a semicolon); and Why That Fact Reflects No Credit on the Old Historians or Discredit on the New Historians."⁷⁰ Novick explained that his way of understanding the past "is thoroughly contextual." He was therefore eager to figure out what battles were being fought, why they were taking place, and what the possible future outcomes were thought to be. He commented on the context in which contemporary struggles over Mormon historiography take place. He indicated that he had "been repeatedly amazed at the high incidence of opaque circumlocutions, fudging formuli, and a general air of what I hesitate to call, but cannot forbear from calling, a certain inauthenticity." All of this is involved in the question of objectivity. He noticed that Mormon history is linked to Mormon identity. Controversies over the Mormon past have much to do with concern over what Mormonism is and will be in the future. For Novick, a con-

70. The following quotations are from Novick's Sunstone Symposium talk.

cern with history is an indication of anxiety about identity.⁷¹ I strongly agree; this is true for both unbelievers and believers. Put another way, the writing of history, I believe, is necessarily an effort, among other things, to manage the future. This makes it what I like to call political. Be that as it may, “in Mormon agonizing over history,” according to Novick, “the question of historical objectivity has become central.” With this I also fully agree.

“Old” and “New” Mormon History and the “Objectivity Question”

Why would Novick, as his title asserts, suggest that what he calls an Old Mormon History is more objective than a New Mormon History since he argues that there is no such thing as “objectivity”? He makes a case that the old way the Saints have told the story of their past has a kind of “objectivity” that is *imposed* by the conventions of the Latter-day Saint community and not one that is somehow *discovered*. Novick argues that history, like other human endeavors, including the sciences, is a social construction that is governed by formal and informal rules. Following the appropriate methods, rules, or dogmas of a science yields what can be thought of as “objectivity” in the only way that Novick thinks it makes sense to talk about objectivity. In somewhat the same sense, he claims that the business of telling the story of the Mormon past is the concern and crucial business of Latter-day Saints. Having that history told in a certain way furthers the vital interest of believing Latter-day Saints. The Saints are, he maintains, fully justified in insisting that their history be told from their perspective—that is, it ought to be faith promoting, and it ought to manifest and support the faith of the Saints. To do this, according to Novick, would be to write “objective” history.

Novick advances an intriguing argument. He indicates that there is a way in which a historical account, or indeed any explanation, can be said to be objective.

71. Novick demonstrates in his book on the Holocaust that the recent massive attention to those dreadful death camps is a product of a deep desire to preserve some semblance of Jewish identity.

It is a different sense, indeed, than the traditional one. It is a social, contextual definition, inextricably tied to the community in which it arises and flourishes. Just as older notions of historical objectivity were frequently grounded in models of science, so the new notion arose from new conceptions of science, new ideas about what made scientific findings objectively true.

Novick argues that, from within the categories of faith, the Saints have available to them something like the norms that govern the activities of various mature scientific communities and, by analogy, other communities in general. These categories, understandings, and explanations rigidly exclude competing accounts. Therefore, within the LDS vocabulary—he offers as examples the Latter-day Saint understanding of *prophet* and *revelation*, which he indicates “have clear and unambiguous meanings”—are the makings of a kind of scientific vocabulary that are properly used by the Saints to exclude those who challenge the understanding of believers. In addition, he indicates that he thought that the Saints, following the pattern of the Old Mormon History,

have the strength of will, the requisite certitude to insist that discrepant or anomalous findings that contradict the governing paradigm be swept aside. They also have the strength of will, and certainly the temperament, to insist, as a condition of entry to the legitimate community of discourse, on conformity to the dictates of the paradigm. All of these . . . are the preconditions for establishing a paradigmatic discipline of Mormon history capable of generating objective findings.

Novick then points out that he feels that

New [Mormon] Historians, by contrast, fare very badly in all of these crucial respects. In every one they equivocate when what is called for is certitude and clarity. On the crucial questions of the privileging of naturalistic or faithful explanation and the status of sacred texts, they are particularly wobbly. Time and again, in going through their works, I have tried

to get a clear fix on where they stood on these questions and found myself lost in fog. The purpose of their scholarship, their research program, if you will, is very ambiguous.

So it turns out that, from Novick's perspective, the "consistent and coherent dogmatism of the Old Historians provides at least a sketch of a paradigmatic historical discipline," and "they have a consensual research agenda—producing work that is faith promoting. They have a consistent metatheoretical and ontological standpoint based on neoorthodox, literal, correlated Mormon doctrine."⁷² Furthermore "they have relatively clear criteria for evaluating evidence, privileging accounts and sacred texts (revelations by those authorized to receive them, and testimony in the Mormon sense), disregarding, in good conscience, evidence that contradicted these, disregarding, in particular, reports from anti-Mormon sources."

One might ask, must the Church of Jesus Christ surrender to those few who insist it become a community in which one can believe or not believe just about what one wants? Novick's answer is instructive: "Any community that is entered into voluntarily and can be departed from peacefully is surely entitled to proclaim and live by its own values, to establish its own membership requirements, institutional norms, and conditions of continued membership."

The most crippling element in the ideology of New Mormon Historians is, according to Novick, their endorsement of tolerant norms that are quite incompatible with what is needed to sustain the kind of autocratic "community of inquiry that alone can generate objective findings." Why is such a dogmatic community of discourse desirable? Novick has an answer well worth considering. First, he surmises, as I have often done, that some of the drive for revisionist accounts of the Mormon past "comes from the general influence of secular modernity."⁷³ He also claims, and I agree, that there is precious "little protection for Mormon sacredness. There is vulnerability to external

72. Those doing what they call New Mormon History, Novick observes, "repeatedly distance themselves from the Old Historians' faith-promoting agenda."

73. This is a point I have repeatedly emphasized. See, for example, Louis Midgley, "A Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy Challenges Cultural Mormon Neglect of the Book of Mormon:

challenge, primarily the diffuse challenge posed by a skeptical secular worldview from which Mormons in the late twentieth century can hardly isolate themselves.” Finally, he insists, and I believe correctly, that “the specifically historical challenge is not . . . primarily external from so-called anti-Mormons.” There are, of course, challenges posed by both sectarian and secular anti-Mormons, but Novick identifies what he considers “a much more dangerous challenge” that he saw coming “from inside the church, from Mormon historians who have been in the forefront of threats to received tradition.”⁷⁴

Novick sets out the characteristics that an objective New Mormon Historian presumably ought to manifest. She must be neutral and have no stake in what she writes. Nor should she be an advocate. The historian working fully within the norms of the profession must be insulated from religious, political, and social pressures. The historian must avoid partisanship and should not have an investment in arriving at conclusions. She is to let the chips fall where they may as she lets the facts speak their truth through her as a kind of neutral observer of the past. One of the hallmarks of the objectivist consciousness is the fetishizing of what are believed to be “facts.” Objectivity is compromised when history is written for utilitarian purposes.

But all of this is, according to Novick, utter nonsense. It is neither possible nor desirable. Novick shows that what is behind this illusion or “noble dream” is the notion that the historian should approach the past without preconceptions, the idea that observation is prior to theory. Novick argues that there is no such thing as a “neutral observation language” and that there is “no set of terms not themselves saturated” in a theory “by which rival claims could be measured against each other in any straightforward fashion.” Radically competing claims are hence incommensurable. They begin with fundamentally different preconceptions. The faith of the Saints provides a lens through which at least a portion of the past is viewed. And this provides them

Some Reflections on the ‘Impact of Modernity,’” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/2 (1994): 283–334.

74. I am not sure I would describe these folks as inside the faith. Instead, they seem to be former Saints, nominal or cultural Mormons, and in some instances unruly dissidents.

with something roughly analogous to what one can find in the mature sciences and in the “community-grounded objectivity” found there. It suggests “that we have here a model situation in which a coherent sense of objectivity is approachable. This is what historians thought they had in previous, less-sophisticated models of science, and the original misconceived quest for mirrorlike objectivity was based on that.” “There is no doubt that it is, in principle, not just a model of dogma but a totalitarian model. The scientific community is not experienced as tyrannical by scientists because their socialization into its assumptions and rules is so complete that the prisoners dance in their chains. They no more regard it as tyrannical than we do the dictionary that tells us how we must spell words” nor the formal or informal rules of grammar or the alphabet to which we are enslaved in order to be free to communicate.

As Novick demonstrated in *That Noble Dream*, historians were once quite confident that they could eventually achieve historical objectivity. But later they were not quite so sure. Objectivity might not be attainable, but it still could function as an ideal. The goal of having one’s writing mirror the past remained. In addition, the historian ought to account for all the evidence or at least attempt to do so. And one ought to allow as few preconceptions as possible. One of the things that renders the lust for objectivity incoherent, according to Novick, is the problem of selecting from the mass of

historical data . . . the handful that we can fit in even the largest book, and the associated problem of how we arrange those bits that we choose. The criterion of selection and the way we arrange the bits we choose are not given out there in the historical record. Neutrality, value-freedom, and absence of preconceptions on the part of the historian would not result in a neutral account, it would result in no account at all because any historian, precisely to the extent that she was neutral, without values, free of preconceptions, would be paralyzed, would not have the foggiest notion of how to go about choosing from the vast, unbelievably messy chaos of stuff out there.

Novick points out that when historians sense these kinds of problems with the idea of objectivity, they shift to other terms that are “makeshift, functional equivalents. They say that while perhaps an account should not aim at objectivity, it should aim at being fair or balanced.” He then demonstrates how vacuous the notion of balance is in dealing with any substantive issue. What would be, Novick asks, a balanced or fair account of the crimes or accomplishments of the USSR? Likewise, sometimes New Mormon Historians claim that one ought to tell a story from the way it appeared to the participants. That would seem reasonable. Novick notices that “almost every account of Mormon origins that I have read by members of this group brackets questions of the historicity of the Book of Mormon and of its authorship and says, ‘Let’s look at things from the point of view of believers without evaluating those beliefs.’” He doubts that this ploy is appropriate. Why? One would come up with odd conclusions “if you privileged the standpoint of the Politburo in the case of the history of the Soviet Union.” Another big issue in Mormon historiography has been concern over what is considered the suppression of evidence that goes contrary to one’s viewpoint. Any well-informed account of the Soviet Union would necessarily be suppressing many positive facts about that regime if the historian’s conclusion was negative. Selection of information simply must be made. And everything else is suppressed.

For these and numerous other reasons set out in *That Noble Dream*, Novick concludes that “the traditional idea of historical objectivity seems . . . an incoherent and vacuous ideal.” He also realizes that it is difficult to convince those with commitments to the myth of objectivity to give it up. The reason is that it “performs important professional functions. It has inspired heroic scholarly labors by historians who have made it clear that if they did not believe they were producing or contributing to an objective account of the past, they would abandon their work.” Though Novick’s views on the objectivity question are increasingly shared by those who have pondered the question, they are far from universal in the historical profession. If historical objectivity is not just unachievable but incoherent, one can “make no judgment about the relative objectivity of Old and New Mormon Historians.

The application of the term, in this sense, to historians or historical writing is a category mistake, like saying, “This theory is purple or more purple than that theory.”

Novick grants that “New Mormon Historians in their presentations more closely approximate the style and folkways of secular objectivist historians than the Old Mormon Historians have. This is clearly the case, but it only shows that they share a common delusion about what that style and those folkways signify.” New Mormon Historians, according to Novick, “want to go to a place called *objectivity* that they have heard a lot about in graduate school and elsewhere.” He finds it necessary to inform them, since he “knows a good deal about the territory, . . . that it is mythical, Shangri-la. It doesn’t exist. But they say, ‘Of course it exists. It has been described repeatedly; indeed, people have written instructions on how to get there, people have even claimed to reside in the suburbs, if not the central city.’ They have said, in words with great resonance . . . , ‘This is the place’—or at least ‘nearby the place.’” The “place called *objectivity*,” Novick explains, simply “doesn’t exist.” There is, however,

another place called *objectivity*, but it’s not at all like the first one. The climate probably is not to your taste; indeed, the climate is just like that of the place you are trying to get away from, the reason you started on this new historical journey in the first place. If you insist, I will point you in that direction, but do think about it. There are lots of other places besides *objectivity* you might want to settle in—. . . places where you can freely explore your past, think about it, and negotiate its shape and meaning, . . . [where] you can set about doing what we all in truth do; construct a past appropriate to your sense of where you are now and where you want to be tomorrow.

Those who strive for objectivity wrongly believe that, by attempting to avoid bias and preconceptions, they will be more or less able to reach the goal of mirroring how the past really was in what they write. To accomplish this, the historians must “purge themselves of external loyalties.” Why? The reason is that their allegiance is to professional

colleagues who share a commitment to the norms of their craft, including the myth of objectivity. The assumption is that, if and only if the historian approaches the past without loyalties to any community other than the history profession and its norms; without theories, longings, wishes, hopes, desires; without preconceptions and without faith, then the facts will speak their truth through them as neutral observers.⁷⁵ But this mythology has recently collapsed. Novick insists that to

an ever-increasing number of historians in recent decades it has not just seemed unapproachable, but an incoherent ideal; not impossible, in the sense of unachievable . . . , but meaningless. This is not because of human frailty on the part of the historian . . . , not because of irresistible outside pressures.

If Novick is right, then there is nothing in principle that is problematic or questionable about writing with the conscious intention of building and defending the faith. What seems to keep the Saints from doing this is fear of rejection by the history profession. But, again, if Novick is right on the objectivity question, then much of what passes as sophisticated methodology is bunk—a confused and confusing, as well as debilitating, ideology.

Novick also appears to agree with me “that there is no middle ground—meaning that there is no middle ground between Joseph Smith as prophet and Joseph Smith as not prophet” and that ultimately one has “to choose which side are you on,” invoking some colorful language from William Shakespeare: “Under which king, besonian? Speak, or die.”⁷⁶

Historical Objectivism and the New Mormon History

I have often indicated that I have no interest in a history in which the Saints, including Latter-day Saint historians, are pictured as fault-

75. Novick pointed out that, “while historians in recent years have been increasingly loath to call themselves scientific, the natural sciences have always been an important model or benchmark for objectivity in history.” They often have a faulty understanding of the sciences, which appear not to be inductive but deductive. The simple reason is that, without a theory or conjecture, there is nothing evident. Evidence is necessarily theory-dependent.

76. *Henry IV, Part II*, 5.3.113 (Riverside ed.).

less heroes, nor do I desire to have textual materials suppressed or ignored by (or about) historians. I am not urging what is now sometimes called, often for polemical purposes, a sanitized history of anything or anyone. I also want my historians, like the Saints generally, to be pictured without halos. But I also expect Latter-day Saints, including historians, whatever their limitations and foibles, to defend their faith as best they can.

In 1980, when I started an inquiry into recent Latter-day Saint historiography, I was led to do so by two distressing things: (1) what seemed to me to be a rather common obsession with an objective, balanced, neutral, detached, disinterested style of history and (2) an appeal to magic, myth, and mysticism as explanations of Joseph Smith and the recovery of the Book of Mormon. I was also baffled when I discovered that those who were staunch believers seemed quite indifferent to several rudimentary efforts then being advanced to explain away the Book of Mormon and the founding theophanies. My arguments were seen and then brushed aside as mirroring the concerns expressed by some of the Brethren about the work of some writers. I was immediately pictured as a Neanderthal traditionalist (or neo-traditionalist) and consequently as one opposed to the so-called New Mormon History, however that amorphous label was understood. I was also lumped with those among the Brethren who were troubled by some of the more secular history that seemed to them to explain away the faith or that was at least indifferent to its veracity. I do not believe that I fit the polemical stereotype attributed to the Brethren, but they probably do not easily fit that stereotype either. It must be remembered that Mark Hofmann's mischief was generating much confusion and had thrown the whole enterprise of writing about the Mormon past into question. The fact is that Hofmann's forgeries and the rumors that he got Brent Metcalfe to spread led some Mormon historians to question their faith or to turn against it.⁷⁷

77. Grant Palmer provides a striking example of this, but there are others who might be mentioned who in one way or another fit this pattern. For the details about Palmer's enthrallment with Mark Hofmann's forgeries, especially with the so-called salamander letter, see Louis Midgley, "Prying into Palmer," *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 365–410.

Borrowing the nebulous label “New Mormon History” from various Latter-day Saint and RLDS writers,⁷⁸ Novick links those easily subsumed under this loaded label directly to the myth of objective history—that is, to the belief that historians are presumably able to let the facts speak their truth through them as neutral observers of the past and are thereby able to identify what really happened. Is Novick right about this? Is the myth of objectivity still alive and well among those writing about the Mormon past who tend to see themselves as New Mormon Historians? Have there been and are there still those enchanted by such an ideology? The answer, even if we ignore historians like Quinn (who insists on what he calls “functional” if not full objectivity), is an emphatic yes.

Some historians—perhaps embarrassed by the serious decline in the popularity of the ideology associated with the earlier demand for modeling history on a confused and long-abandoned notion of what goes on in the natural sciences, though still anxious to boast of borrowing what they imagine are powerful tools or explanations from the social sciences—flatly deny that those they label New Mormon Historians believe that an objective account of the past is possible.⁷⁹ Apologists

78. I have traced the rise and use of the label “New Mormon History” by those writing about the Mormon past in “The Acids of Modernity and the Crisis in Mormon Historiography,” in *Faithful History*, 190–92, and 216–19 nn. 4–23. Those fond of the label cannot seem to agree on who founded the movement. Some point to Fawn Brodie or Juanita Brooks, but often Leonard Arrington is seen as at least the bellwether of the movement. If this is so, it is odd that he never seems to have mentioned a New Mormon History in his many publications. In addition, I have been unable to discover any mention of a New Mormon History in his personal writings now housed at Utah State University. Brooks and Brodie, of course, flourished before there was any talk of a New Mormon History and can only be pictured as precursors of that movement, but Arrington cannot be seen as a mere precursor of a movement that was to look to him as its leader and founding father. He was active during the heyday of that movement. Is it plausible that Arrington was the leader of a movement, the name of which he neglected to mention in his published work or private papers? Or has an effort been made by others, with their own agendas, to turn him into an ideological icon? After going through his papers, I am tempted to try to rescue Arrington from his idolaters. For a modest beginning to such a project, see my essay entitled “Naturalistic Terms: Some Reflections on a Motto and Type of Historical Explanation.” This is accessible at www.fairlds.org/pubs/conf/2001MidL.html (accessed 28 June 2006).

79. They most often qualify their attachment to the myth of objectivity by denying that they believe that full objectivity is possible. In this way the ideology they acquired in

for the so-called New Mormon History sometimes claim that most of their tribe are not in thrall to the myth of an objective history, which they declare to have been “a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century chimera long abandoned by the profession.”⁸⁰ This assertion flies in the face of what Novick set out in *That Noble Dream*. Those making it have to ignore much of the history of the objectivity question, as well as considerable evidence of appeals to objectivity among New Mormon Historians. They also fail to notice the shift from appeals to objectivity to talk about the necessity of balance, detachment, and neutrality. The problem is not the word *objectivity*; if Novick is even close to being right, it is the larger myth about the methods and goals of historians that has served as the foundation of the professional historical enterprise from the start. This has, unfortunately, been partially replicated with the emergence of a professional Mormon history.⁸¹

New Mormon History is often contrasted with an Old Mormon History, which is disparaged as “largely devotional, popular, or polemical in nature.”⁸² The New Mormon History is properly professional and so no longer apologetic or defensive—except when defending itself from its critics—but is, instead, a noble effort at self understanding. “Instead of defending or attacking LDS faith claims . . . the new historians were more interested in examining the Mormon past in the hope of understanding it—and understanding themselves.”⁸³ “The New Mormon History,” according to one of its apologists, “of course had many variations, but it was characterized by a restrained voice, an academic style of writing, and a search for understanding the Mormon past for its own sake and indirectly the understanding of self.”⁸⁴ The New Mormon

graduate school remains in place—objectivity thus remains the ultimate goal or at least a worthy ideal.

80. Ronald W. Walker, “Mormonism’s ‘Happy Warrior’: Appreciating Leonard J. Arrington,” *Journal of Mormon History* 25/1 (1999): 113–30, at 127 n. 35. This essay is substantially what eventually appeared as chapter 3 (“The New Mormon History: Historical Writing since 1950”) in Ronald W. Walker, David J. Whittaker, and James B. Allen, *Mormon History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 60–112, at 111 n. 184.

81. See Midgley, “The Acids of Modernity,” 224 n. 82 for some illustrations of this move.

82. Walker, Whittaker, and Allen, *Mormon History*, 92.

83. Walker, Whittaker, and Allen, *Mormon History*, 61.

84. Walker, “Mormonism’s ‘Happy Warrior,’” 116.

Historians have tended to steer away from controversy over the historical grounds and contents of their own faith. However, when challenged, the New Mormon Historians have been feisty, apologetic, and even polemical.

The lingering commitment to vestiges of historical objectivism seems to have blunted some of the urge that certain pious LDS historians may have to defend their faith. This is unfortunate. However, borrowing from something Alexis de Tocqueville once said about the typical American tendency to insist that they act solely out of self-interest narrowly conceived, I respect these folks too much to actually believe what they say. They will, when sufficiently irritated by attacks, rise up and defend their faith in spite of the indoctrination that tells them that, for professional reasons, they should avoid such apparently unseemly behavior. Be that as it may, the defense of the faith and the Saints is seen by those enthralled with historical objectivism as an embarrassing slip from professional norms. So defending the faith has shifted away from those normally known as professional Latter-day Saint historians. Terryl Givens, who was not socialized into the professional history club, provides a remarkable example of one both willing and able to provide a carefully crafted response to literary anti-Mormonism and then to defend the Book of Mormon from criticisms.⁸⁵

Mysticism—A Way of Sidestepping the Question of Truth

A commitment to historical objectivity does not restrain but emboldens critics of the faith of the Saints. At one important level critics insist that even believing historians must be detached from their faith when they write about the Mormon past. Why? Historians, it is said, “cannot prove historically” that their

beliefs are true and certainly cannot apply these beliefs to [their] scholarly research because there is no historically acceptable evi-

85. See Terryl L. Givens, *Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), as well as his *By the Hand of Mormon*. Davis Bitton, James B. Allen, Richard L. Bushman, and others within the club provide instructive examples of Latter-day Saint historians who will defend the faith.

dence of God, divine intervention, or life after death. Historians have no way to discern the hand of God or to measure the validity of inspiration because historians have no tools to deal with the supernatural. They can neither confirm nor disconfirm mystical experiences.⁸⁶

Here we have all the telltale signs of the debilitating impact of historical objectivism on those writing about the Mormon past. Notice the demand for proof, whatever that might mean. And this writer also insists on reducing encounters of seers or prophets with the divine to merely “mystical experiences.” But what typically falls under that category has exactly no substantial or cognitive content. These experiences are most often said to take place only after disciplined meditation or with the help of drugs—when the exterior world has been blotted out. The intense, entirely inner experience is most often described as ineffable.

I agree that what seems to be going on in the consciousness of the typical mystic cannot possibly be confirmed or disconfirmed by a historian. Why? If the experience is ineffable, then exactly nothing can be said about it and it cannot contain a message. However, Brother Joseph’s encounters with the divine were of an entirely different order. He talked about metal plates containing engravings, which he showed to others, and about other artifacts from antiquity such as the interpreters. He recovered a five-hundred-page book claiming to be an authentic ancient history. Historians can and do deal with this kind of thing, though they are, of course, not likely to come up with proof or certainty. It is, obviously, absurd to insist on proof when the issue is faith—that is, whether one has made, for whatever reasons, a decision to trust God rather than some merely human nostrum. What Joseph Smith provided is not the indescribable, ineffable stuff of mysticism. Unlike mystical intuition, it is grist for the historian’s mill. I have tried to show why Latter-day Saint historians should not be charmed into talking about magic, myth, and mysticism when they confront Joseph

86. Clayton, “Does History Undermine Faith?” 38.

Smith. The case against seeing Joseph as a typical mystic and the Book of Mormon as a typical mystical text seems overwhelming.

Our critics can see where those who now try to picture Brother Joseph as a mystic are heading. For example, Richard and Joan Ostling claim that there are writers who, “not wanting to call Smith’s mind diseased, call him a mystic.” What the Ostlings think this means is that his experiences were merely a “subjective experience. With this perspective, the question of truth content is sidestepped.”⁸⁷ But the Ostlings are confused on this issue. By labeling Brother Joseph’s experiences as mystical, such critics effectively denied that they had substantive contents or that they were true. Labeling them mystical is merely a way of asserting that they did not take place outside of Joseph’s mind. If he was a typical mystic, there were no metal plates, no real messengers from the ancient world, no Lehi colony—just an experience of having his identity disappear in a momentary intense blur in consciousness. This is merely another way of explaining away his prophetic truth claims.

Mysticism—An Open Door to Atheism

D. Michael Quinn is currently the most persistent advocate of the wisdom of describing Joseph Smith as a mystic.⁸⁸ I will grant that there are different kinds of experiences that have been described as mystical. Some might even be authentic visions of real heavenly messengers; some of those described as mystics could even have been genuine prophets or seers. But the confused and convoluted literature on mystics and mystical theology does not help to sort out the genuine from the spurious or New Age nonsense from genuine encounters with messengers from the heavens or to classify the efforts of those striving to shed their identity through drugs or meditation (an inner journey). Quinn only offers confusion on these issues. In addition, it turns out that, since the typical mystical experience has no content and is therefore ineffable, it is also entirely consistent with the most radical atheism.

87. Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 264.

88. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 486–87 n. 368.

Sam Harris, as Michael Jibson demonstrates,⁸⁹ pushes a dogmatic, militant atheism, opposing all “faith-based religions”—that is, religion that has any content or that is not merely the product of drugs or meditation routines or is not merely self-generated. Though an atheist himself, Harris is fond of mysticism and loves mushy talk about “spiritual experience.” He boasts of his deep “debt to a variety of contemplative traditions that have their origin in India.”⁹⁰ He describes his own passion for strands of Buddhism and Hinduism, even boasting of having spent “many years . . . practicing various techniques of meditation” presumably borrowed from those religious traditions.⁹¹ Harris longs for “the intrinsic freedom of consciousness, unencumbered by any dogma.”⁹² He claims that “the many distinguished contemplatives who have graced the sordid history of Christianity—Meister Eckhart, Saint John of the Cross, Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint Seraphim of Sarov, the venerable desert fathers, et al.—these were certainly extraordinary men and women: but their mystical insights, for the most part, remained shackled . . . and accordingly failed to fly.”⁹³ Why? They were unfortunately trapped in a religion with substantive contents. In addition, Harris is fully engrossed in the kind of human experiences generated by meditative exercises that he thinks “can be appropriately described as ‘spiritual’ or ‘mystical’—experiences of meaningfulness, selflessness, and heightened emotion that surpass our narrow identity as ‘selves’ and escape our current understanding of the mind and brain.”⁹⁴ Harris recommends the use of “a variety of techniques, ranging from the practice of meditation to the use of psychedelic drugs.”⁹⁵ He insists that, if we all would just take up some meditative technique or take a drug-induced trip, we would no longer fear death or kill each other. Our hostilities would melt away, and the world would be a fine place in which to vegetate. His models

89. Jibson, “Imagine,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, 233–64.

90. Harris, *End of Faith*, 293 n. 12.

91. Harris, *End of Faith*, 293 n. 12.

92. Harris, *End of Faith*, 294 n. 12.

93. Harris, *End of Faith*, 294 n. 12.

94. Harris, *End of Faith*, 40–41.

95. Harris, *End of Faith*, 40.

are the gurus of India, who long ago learned the secret of passivity and peaceful living.

Harris is, in addition, passionate about his commitment to science, though he is troubled by talk from the likes of Thomas Kuhn or Karl Popper about the limits of science. He brushes all that aside and proclaims the hope that science will soon somehow have the answer to how the brain can be manipulated (by drugs or otherwise) to yield a spiritual or mystical experience that he believes “will suffuse our lives with love, compassion, ecstasy and awe.” He is also confident that such a spirituality or mysticism will be consonant with reason and science and human well-being. “Even now,” he surmises, “we can see the first stirrings among psychologists and neuroscientists of what may one day become a genuine rational approach to these matters.” Notice the words *hope* and *may*. Apparently we have not reached the promised land yet, but we are now beginning a wondrous atheist journey. We need not, he is confident, “renounce all forms of spirituality or mysticism to be on good terms with reason.”⁹⁶ His naive scientism is clearly a dogma; his own bizarre brand of faith-based religion begins with a longing for an escape from a sense of self, whatever that means. He does not, though, recognize this as his own merely secular dogmatism.

Given this kind of confusing and confused appeal to mysticism, where a fulminating atheist is groping for an encounter with nothing, is there any point in Latter-day Saints trying to carve out a place in that world for Joseph Smith? Is it not better to explain to ourselves (and to anyone else who cares to listen) how we understand our own faith in our own vocabulary and in our own way? Do we need to borrow this kind of rubbish from religious studies or pop psychology or New Age nonsense as a way of presenting our faith to others or of better understanding our own faith?

Scholarly Endeavor as Sacrifice and Sacrament

Joseph Smith made his mark. His most significant achievement seems to have come right at the start, when he had virtually no for-

96. Harris, *End of Faith*, 43.

mal education and no experience. The Book of Mormon started it all. Then, in fourteen short years, he went on to accomplish additional wonders, however one understands him. Now, there is a habit among gentile skeptics and critics to downplay all this. He was, so it is commonly claimed, a typical American, or he produced something that was typically American. But this is sheer nonsense. There are a host of reasons for not seeing Joseph as having provided us with something typically American, even if American Latter-day Saints now have a hankering to be part of some larger ethos.

I am at a loss to understand why Latter-day Saint historians would not want to write, as best they can, faith-promoting history. Do we not all covenant with God to build and defend his kingdom? Why then object to trying one's best to advance the faith? When writing about the Mormon past, why would Latter-day Saints yield to the urge to bow down to the conventions and folkways of the history profession? Is not being a historian (or anything else) always necessarily secondary and subordinate to being a faithful Saint? Those who have simply ceased to believe or never did believe are in a radically different category. All our efforts should honor God. In the deepest and most profound sense we should be producing devotional history. All that we do, everything that we write, should be our offering placed on the altar as our sacrifice to God. Nothing less than this is a truly worthy endeavor.

The DNA Donnybrook

In 2002 Signature Books launched another of its attacks on the Book of Mormon by publishing a book that, among other things, argued that recent studies of DNA markers among Amerindian populations demonstrate what appears to be an Asian rather than a Near Eastern origin and that this thereby proves that the Book of Mormon is fiction.⁹⁷ Put this way, though, the argument seems flawed. Why?

97. See Thomas W. Murphy, "Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 47–77. Murphy teaches anthropology at a community college near Seattle, Washington. He has effectively excommunicated himself

There are perfectly reasonable explanations for why DNA markers from colonists from the Near East, if those could be determined, might not turn up in DNA samples. One author has explained it in this way: “In 600 BC there were probably several million American Indians living in the Americas. If a small group of Israelites, say less than thirty, entered such a massive native population, it would be very hard to detect their genes today.” If this is true, and I can see no reason why it is not, then it is simply pointless to claim, as this same author does, that the results of DNA sampling will cast light on the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. I am not quoting a Latter-day Saint apologist attempting to blunt some powerful argument from a critic of the Book of Mormon. I am, instead, quoting Simon Southerton, an Australian plant geneticist and recently excommunicated Latter-day Saint who also happens to be a persistent critic of the Book of Mormon.⁹⁸

The language I quoted in the previous paragraph responds to the argument that “the bottleneck effect, genetic drift, and other technical problems would prevent us from detecting Israelite genes.”⁹⁹ Southerton’s response to this issue was placed on the Signature Books Web page by Tom Kimball, the publicist for Signature Books. But this March 2005 statement seems to have been counterproductive and has now been replaced by other language that skirts the real issues. As of March 2006, the title of Southerton’s apology reads as follows: “Answers to Apologetic Claims about DNA and the Book of Mormon.” Southerton is clearly on the defensive. Nothing is now said about bottlenecks, genetic drift, and so forth. Southerton’s 2005 statement

with a series of attacks on the faith of the Saints and especially by assisting Protestant critics in their war against the Book of Mormon.

98. Simon Southerton, “Dr. Southerton Responds to Misinformation Disseminated by Apologists about DNA,” taken from the Signature Books Web page on 10 March 2005. A copy of this item, which is no longer available, has been placed in my papers in the BYU Special Collections.

99. Southerton’s original response, “Answering the DNA Apologetics,” appeared on an anti-Mormon message board, 15 February 2005. His primary answer to the argument about the bottleneck effect, etc., was that he agreed entirely. “In 600 BC there were probably several million American Indians living in the Americas. If a small group of Israelites entered such a massive native population it would be very, very hard to detect their genes 200, 2,000, or even 20,000 years later.” There he made the issue not genetics, but rather the interpretation of the Book of Mormon, something on which he is not an expert.

has now been replaced by the following: “The argument that Lamanite DNA may have gone extinct strains reinterpretations of the Book of Mormon to [the] breaking point.”¹⁰⁰ So the real issue is not genetic science but how one reads the Book of Mormon. Southerton wants to force the Saints to adopt his partisan (mis)reading of the Book of Mormon, which ignores at least fifty years of careful examination of the text, in an effort to save his attack on its historical authenticity and to convince the Saints to abandon the book, as he has done.

In addition, Southerton has, among other things, launched an attack on the essay by John Butler that appears in this number of the *FARMS Review*.¹⁰¹ Southerton is especially concerned to explain away a DNA study done in Iceland, which is cited by Butler and which demonstrates that the bulk of historical people no longer show up in genetic samples even when their existence can be identified in genealogical records.¹⁰² Southerton offers a list of plausible reasons for this, most of which, in addition to many others, apply with equal force to the Lehi colony (e.g., wars, natural disasters, and in-and-out migrations). And these most certainly are found among pre-Columbian peoples generally. From my perspective, Southerton may have come close to explaining what happened to all that missing DNA in Iceland. He now needs to apply this same kind of analysis to the pre-Columbian Amerindians and then to the text of the Book of Mormon. This would, however, take him back to his original statement that the DNA markers from a small group from Palestine would probably disappear entirely when inserted into a much larger indigenous population.

Thus it turns out that the debate over DNA and the Book of Mormon has increasingly shifted from genetic issues to how one reads the Book of Mormon. Staunch critics like Southerton, Murphy,

100. Simon G. Southerton “Answers to Apologetic Claims about DNA and the Book of Mormon,” last updated March 2006; see www.signaturebooks.com/excerpts/Losing2.htm (accessed 26 June 2006).

101. See John M. Butler, “Addressing Questions surrounding the Book of Mormon and DNA Research,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 101–8. This essay appeared earlier on the FARMS Web site. In addition to Butler’s article, we have also included in this number of the *FARMS Review* an essay by David G. Stewart Jr., entitled “DNA and the Book of Mormon,” pages 109–38.

102. See Butler, “Addressing Questions,” 104–6.

and Kimball end up insisting that the Book of Mormon must be read in the most wooden, narrow, mindless possible way so that they can milk whatever they can from current DNA research. Those associated with Signature Books have now shifted from gloating about DNA evidence to quarreling about the contents of the Book of Mormon and how it has been understood by the Saints. But even in the early stages of their polemic against the Book of Mormon, one could see signs of this shift taking place. Hence the following revealing remark by Southerton: “However, such a scenario does not square with what the Book of Mormon plainly states and with what the prophets have taught for 175 years.”¹⁰³ What this indicates is that his argument ultimately rests on his insistence that the Book of Mormon must be read as a history of all pre-Columbian Amerindians from Alaska on the west to Newfoundland on the east and then all the way south to Tierra del Fuego and going back as far as one can imagine. Really? Other than a few anti-Mormons, I have never met anyone who believed such a thing. And certainly this has not been the received understanding among informed Latter-day Saints during my lifetime.

I can understand how Southerton might, for moral or other reasons, leave the church. What seems odd is the passion with which he now wants to settle accounts with the Saints. The tone of his remarks is at times irritating and his reasoning a bit too sophistic. In addition, he has the habit of stooping to an occasional gratuitous insult. One of these involves me. In a response to an essay by Ryan Parr that appeared in a recent issue of the *FARMS Review*, Southerton inserted the following footnote:

Louis Midgley, in the editor’s introduction (“The First Steps,” *FARMS Review* 17/1 [2005]), introduces Parr’s review of *Losing a Lost Tribe* under the heading “Secular Anti-Mormon Mockery Exposed.” According to Midgley, what the *FARMS Review* has “provided and promoted are more richly detailed, carefully written, fully documented accounts of the crucial texts and events in the Mormon past (xvii).” “The growth of an obviously

103. See “Dr. Southerton Responds” for this language.

faithful and sophisticated literature on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, much of it published in this *Review* or elsewhere under the FARMS imprint, has led to considerable dissonance among dissidents, cultural Mormons, and anti-Mormon zealots. Critics respond to this scholarly literature with vilification, animosity, and acrimony, with slurs, name-calling, and unseemly personal attacks.” But as anyone familiar with the discussion knows, it is precisely in the *FARMS Review*, most notoriously from Midgley himself, that one can most reliably expect to find name-calling and personal attacks.¹⁰⁴

My one tiny little mention of Southerton consists of the following: “and Ryan Parr has examined Simon Southerton’s attack on the Book of Mormon.”¹⁰⁵ That is it. No personal attack; no name-calling. The other language that Southerton quoted is separated by over thirty pages of argumentation from my brief mention of his name. But, from his jaded perspective, “anyone familiar with the discussion knows” that I am the one from whom “one can most reliably expect to find name-calling and personal attacks.” Really? *Anyone*? Is it that obvious? What discussion is he talking about? DNA? I have published a few things about the unseemly Donnybrook incited by Signature Books in an effort to embarrass the church and sell some books.¹⁰⁶ But not one word in that essay, or anything else I have published, can be read as name-calling or as a personal attack on anyone—that is, unless one is determined to dismiss all intellectual history as merely personal attacks and name-calling. Intellectual history could not be done at all if the motivations and influences on the authors were somehow off-limits. This is what constitutes contextualizing our understanding of the past. If we could not struggle to do this sort of thing, we would be reduced to silence.

104. Simon G. Southerton, “An Apologetics Shipwreck: Response to Dr. Ryan Parr,” n. 20 at www.signaturebooks.com/excerpts/Losing3.htm (accessed 13 July 2006).

105. See Midgley, “First Steps,” lii.

106. See Louis Midgley, “The Signature Books Saga,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 361–406.

More on the Caliban

A countercult agency called Living Hope Ministries (operating out of Brigham City, Utah) has produced a series of slick anti-Mormon videos.¹⁰⁷ We have previously examined the video entitled *The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon*.¹⁰⁸ In this issue of the *FARMS Review* we have included David Bokovoy's additional critical commentary on this film.¹⁰⁹ As he did with an earlier video on DNA and the Book of Mormon, once again Murphy, an anthropologist teaching at a community college near Seattle, appears as an "expert" witness in this countercult propaganda film. This time Murphy appears as an authority on Mesoamerican archaeology. He continues to refer to himself as a "Mormon," though in both word and deed he has effectively severed whatever relationship he once may have had with the Church of Jesus Christ.

Some Concluding Remarks

Though we have not often ventured into an area that might be called Mormon theology, we have included in this number of the *FARMS*

107. One of these videos is entitled *Called to be Free* (Brigham City, UT: Living Hope Ministries, 2004). The subtitle is as follows: "The inspiring story of one religious movement's miraculous journey from the bondage of heresy to freedom in Jesus Christ," found at www.lhvm.org/videos.htm (accessed 13 July 2006). Latter-day Saints constitute a major portion of the intended audience for this partisan appraisal of the shifts that took place in the Worldwide Church of God following the death of Herbert W. Armstrong, who, more than anyone else on the old Protestant fundamentalist horizon, began the lucrative business of selling God over the radio. Those closely allied with Herbert W. Armstrong during the palmy days of his radio "ministry" soon discovered, when he passed away (and with the alienation from the movement of Herbert's theatrically gifted though bizarre son, Garner Ted Armstrong), that the income soon began to dry up. Those remaining at the top of the Worldwide Church of God started downsizing to save what remained of the Armstrong empire, and they also made some "theological" adjustments that eventually won the approval of evangelical gatekeepers, including Reverend Kurt Van Gorden, allowing the remnants of the old and now deeply fractured Armstrong movement to gain admittance to the National Association of Evangelicals. Some evangelicals have seen in these weird events a kind of model for what they hope to make happen with Latter-day Saints.

108. See Brant A. Gardner, "Behind the Mask, Behind the Curtain: Uncovering the Illusion," *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 145–95.

109. See David E. Bokovoy, "*The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon: Still Losing the Battle*," in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 3–19.

Review an essay by Richard Sherlock on the first two volumes of Blake Ostler’s imposing series on Mormon theology.¹¹⁰ We also offer an essay by Royal Skousen—whose expertise on the text of the Book of Mormon is well-known—explaining the process of proposing conjectural emendations to that text.¹¹¹ Frank Salisbury has reviewed for us two recent publications that address questions posed by the theory of organic evolution.¹¹² The Saints, we believe, should be wary of those who insist that we must adopt a sectarian young-earth creationist ideology and hence abandon serious science. We need also, of course, to guard against the notion that science relegates God to the rubbish bin. There is, on this issue, a broad promising middle ground that has been both sketched by Latter-day Saint scholars and suggested by the Brethren.

We have reprinted a version of Paul Hoskisson’s study on the golden-calf motif,¹¹³ as well as an interesting brief essay by Stephen Ricks on the sacred handclasp found in both early Christian and classical sources.¹¹⁴ In addition to those essays already mentioned, Shirley Ricks has reviewed an annotated selection of Book of Mormon passages by Jana Riess.¹¹⁵ Brian Hauglid takes a look at a recent Latter-day Saint book on Abraham.¹¹⁶ Thomas Draper and Lindsey Kenny briefly examine a book attempting to draw lessons for parenting from the Book of Mormon.¹¹⁷ (On such a project, I must admit to being a

110. Richard Sherlock, “Blake Ostler’s Mormon Theology,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 291–305.

111. Royal Skousen, “Conjectural Emendation in the Book of Mormon,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 187–231. He has also provided a useful list of such items.

112. Frank B. Salisbury, “The Church and Evolution: A Brief History of Official Statements,” and also Salisbury, “Creation by Evolution?” both in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 307–11, 313–19.

113. Paul Y. Hoskinson, “Aaron’s Golden Calf,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 375–87.

114. Stephen D. Ricks, “*Dexiosis* and *Dextrarum Iunctio*: The Sacred Handclasp in the Classical and Early Christian World,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 431–36.

115. Shirley S. Ricks, “The Book of Mormon Abridged Anew,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 21–33.

116. Brian M. Hauglid, “Look unto Abraham Your Father,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 419–23.

117. Thomas W. Draper and Lindsey Kenny, “Book of Mormon Parenting,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 1–2.

bit skeptical. I am not sure that one can learn directly about parenting, for instance, by examining how Lehi dealt with his boys.) John S. Welch has visited the question of whether the bar of God is “pleasing” or, instead, a place for “pleading.”¹¹⁸ And for those who may wonder about the basic historical accuracy of the Old Testament, John Gee has provided a sketch of a worthwhile study by Kenneth Kitchen.¹¹⁹

I must, I confess, sympathize with those who groan when they see an introduction from me and not one from Daniel Peterson. But as compensation, we have included in this number of the *FARMS Review* two of his essays. One is an effort on his part to respond to a theory advanced by a fellow eager to undercut the authority of the Brethren to preside over the Church of Jesus Christ.¹²⁰ The other essay, which I find delightful, is a more recently crafted essay in the style that readers of the *FARMS Review* have come to expect from Peterson.¹²¹

Editor’s Picks, by Daniel C. Peterson

And now, again, I shall list some of the items treated in the present number of the *FARMS Review* (not including the book notes) and append my personal ratings to them. As always, these ratings were determined in consultation with the two associate editors and the production editor of the *Review*, and after reading what our reviewers have had to say. But the final responsibility for them is mine. Reviewed items that fail to appear in this list were omitted because we simply could not recommend them (which, in certain cases, is putting it very mildly).

This is the scale, inescapably rather subjective, that we use in our rating system:

118. John S. Welch, “Keep the Old Wine in Old Wineskins: The Pleasing (Not Pleading) Bar of God,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 139–47.

119. See John Gee, “The Old Testament as Reliable History,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 425–30.

120. See Daniel C. Peterson, “Authority in the Book of Mosiah,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 149–85.

121. See Daniel C. Peterson, “Mormonism as a Restoration,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 389–417.

- **** Outstanding, a seminal work of the kind that appears only rarely
- *** Enthusiastically recommended
- ** Warmly recommended
- * Recommended

From among the items considered, these are the books that we are willing to endorse:

- **** Blake Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God*
- **** Blake Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Problems of Theism and the Love of God*
- *** Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*
- ** E. Douglas Clark, *The Blessings of Abraham: Becoming a Zion People*
- ** William E. Evenson and Duane E. Jeffery, *Mormonism and Evolution: The Authoritative LDS Statements*
- ** Jana Riess, annotator, *The Book of Mormon: Selections Annotated and Explained*
- ** Trent D. Stephens and D. Jeffrey Meldrum, with Forrest B. Peterson, *Evolution and Mormonism: A Quest for Understanding*
- * Geri Brinley, *The Book of Mormon: A Pattern for Parenting*

Finally, I'm happy to thank those who have made possible this number of the *FARMS Review*. First, obviously, I wish to thank the reviewers, who receive no compensation for their work beyond a free copy of the item they are reviewing—and, frequently, not even that—and a free copy of the *Review* when it appears. Louis Midgley and George Mitton, the *Review's* associate editors, shared generously of their wisdom, knowledge, and experience, as well as of their time and energy. Shirley Ricks, the *Review's* omniscient production editor, is held in awe by those familiar with our production process. Alison Coutts reads each review and article and offers useful suggestions and comments. Paula Hicken does an outstanding job of overseeing

the source checking and proofreading, and was aided in these tasks, this time, by Jaime Alley, Angela Barrionuevo, Megan Johnson, Lia Madsen, Linda Sheffield, and Sandra Thorne (who also helped us in securing some of the illustrations used in this number). Jacob Rawlins, in his quietly proficient manner, put the reviews and articles into their final typeset format. A great deal of work goes into producing each number of the *FARMS Review*. I'm delighted that others do most of it.