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Title Editor's Introduction: Reflections on the Reactions to
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Abstract Peterson mourns the death of his friend and colleague R. Davis Bitton. Peterson then uses Richard Bushman's *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* to examine the validity of Joseph Smith's claim to be a prophet.

Editor's Introduction

REFLECTIONS ON THE REACTIONS TO *ROUGH STONE ROLLING* AND RELATED MATTERS

Daniel C. Peterson

A good personal friend and an enthusiastic friend of the *FARMS Review* died on Friday, 13 April 2007, after a relatively brief illness. The obituary that appeared in the *Deseret Morning News* on the following day, prepared by Davis Bitton himself (with some obvious later modifications by others) roughly a decade before his passing, captured much about the man:

R. Davis Bitton 1930–2007. I, Ronald Davis Bitton, have moved on to the next stage of existence. As you read this, I am having a ball rejoining my parents and grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and dear friends and associates I knew on earth. I am wide awake, no longer struggling with the narcolepsy that handicapped but did not defeat me, and cheerfully taking in the new state of affairs and accepting the callings that will occupy me there. It has been an abundant life. Growing up in Blackfoot, Idaho, where I was born on 22 February 1930, and on a farm in nearby Groveland, I never felt one moment of familial insecurity. My parents, Ronald Wayne and Lola Davis Bitton, loved me and did everything they could to see that I had opportunities, including piano lessons from age six. I learned to work in the house, in the yard, on the farm, and in local retail stores. I learned to write as a reporter for the *Daily Bulletin*. I remember enjoying a trip to the San Francisco

world's fair, fishing and hunting trips, scouting camps, and community concerts. I had great friends and was elected to several student offices. I learned to compete in softball and basketball. I joined a crack high school debating team. As a student at Brigham Young University, missionary in France, enlisted man in the U.S. Army, and graduate student at Princeton University, I felt myself growing in understanding. I went on to be a professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin, the University of California at Santa Barbara, and for 29 years the University of Utah, enjoying many congenial students and colleagues. I have presented papers at scholarly conventions and published articles and books. I have loved good food, good books, the out of doors, music, art, the dappled things. A nurturing home throughout my life has been the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Bishops, stake presidents, teachers, mission presidents, and general authorities I have known have been people I could admire and follow. My own opportunities to serve have been numerous, starting at a very young age and including elders quorum president, counselor in a bishopric, member of the stake high council, and gospel doctrine teacher for many years. From 1972 to 1982 I served as assistant church historian. I have loved the hymns, the scriptures, the temple. I am grateful for Aunt Vilate Thiele, my mother's sister, a steady friend; my other uncles and aunts on both sides; my brother, John Boyd Bitton; my sisters, Marilyn Bitton Lambson and Elaine Bitton Benson; wonderful nephews and nieces; children, Ronald Bitton, Kelly Bitton Burdge, Timothy Bitton, Jill Cochran, Stephanie Ross, Debbie Callahan, Larry Morris, Judy Nauta, Earl Morris, Delbert Morris; their spouses; and 56 grandchildren and great-grandchildren, all of whom are to me a delight. Having learned the value of loyalty, I appreciated the affection and interest of my family as well as cherished friends. No one has been more important to me than my dear wife and companion JoAn, a woman loved by all who knew her. She rallied to

my side, stood by me through thick and thin, grew with me, laughed with me, made good things happen, and, marvel of marvels, agreed to be my companion through time and all eternity. I have not lived a perfect life, but I have tried. And I know in whom I have trusted.

Quite a résumé as it stands, but, still, characteristically modest and understated. A former student of his, Dennis Lythgoe, who himself went on to earn a doctorate and to teach and publish in history, wrote a tribute to Davis in the *Deseret Morning News*, accurately titled “Gentle Mormon Historian Wasn’t Full of Himself.”¹ Lythgoe praised him for his “distinguished, even elegant, career as a historian/professor.”

I was impressed that he was not, unlike so many other professors, full of himself. He was soft-spoken, commented in a group only when he had something important to say—and he taught his classes the same way. . . .

His writing was like his speaking—carefully crafted, never verbose. Like Elmore Leonard, the talented crime novelist, he always left out anything the reader might skip over.

“He gave me,” Lythgoe remembered,

one piece of advice that was very strong, especially for him—he said, “Don’t ever write Mormon history. It will be controversial, and Mormon history is so little regarded nationally that you’ll never get a job.”

Well, I knew that he already wrote Mormon history—even though he was trained as a European historian and wrote books in that specialty—so I asked him about it.²

“I write Mormon history with my left hand,” he said. . . .

He meant that he would always keep that part of his scholarship low key. . . . Although he continued to teach European

1. Dennis Lythgoe, “Gentle Mormon Historian Wasn’t Full of Himself,” *Deseret Morning News*, 29 April 2007.

2. An example of his scholarship on European history is *The French Nobility in Crisis, 1560–1640* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969).

history until he retired, he steadily accelerated his contributions to Mormon history. . . .

I wonder what else Bitton did with his left hand? Few people knew of his excellence as a classical pianist—he seemed always to do everything with just the right touch.

Davis helped to found the Mormon History Association. He delivered numerous academic papers at its annual meetings and served as its president from 1971 to 1972. He won the MHA's 1975 Best Article Award for "The Ritualization of Mormon History" and "The Making of a Community: Blackfoot, Idaho, 1878 to 1910."³ He took the MHA's 1977 Best Bibliography Award home for his invaluable *Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies*.⁴ In 1999, he received the Association's Best Book Award for his biography of George Q. Cannon.⁵

I had admired Davis Bitton for many years, and had heard him speak several times, before I actually met him. I had always especially liked *The Mormon Experience*, a book that he published with his friend and colleague Leonard J. Arrington in 1979.⁶ So it was a delight to get to know him after I came to Utah to teach at Brigham Young University. During the time that Davis was teaching in Santa Barbara, a number of Latter-day Saint friends there had formed a monthly reading group under the whimsical name of "The Gadianton Polysophical Marching and Chowder Society." When many of them relocated to Utah, the GPMCS moved with them, and eventually my wife and I were invited to join. Every month for roughly two decades,

3. Davis Bitton, "The Ritualization of Mormon History," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 43/1 (1975): 67–85; and "The Making of a Community: Blackfoot, Idaho, 1878 to 1910," *Idaho Yesterdays* 19/1 (1975): 2–17.

4. Davis Bitton, *Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1977).

5. Davis Bitton, *George Q. Cannon: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999). A few years later Bitton contributed an essay on Cannon—"George Q. Cannon and the Faithful Narrative of Mormon History"—to the *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1 (2002): 1–17.

6. Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

we've looked forward to visiting with Davis and his wife, JoAn. Debbie and I will miss him terribly.

When a special issue of the *FARMS Review*—then called the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*—was being prepared in response to a substantial attack on the credibility of the Book of Mormon, Davis contacted me. He wasn't sure, he said, whether he really had much to contribute, but he wondered whether I would be willing to include an essay from him in our reply. He was worried, he told me, that some might be confused as to his stance regarding the truth claims of the restoration, and he wanted to “fly the flag,” to show which side he was on. I was, of course, pleased and honored to include the first of several pieces that he would contribute to the *Review*.⁷

In 2001, the mature Davis Bitton critiqued an essay that the much younger Davis Bitton had published in *Dialogue* in 1966.⁸ More than one person, seeing “Davis Bitton” rebutting an article by Davis Bitton, wondered initially whether we hadn't made a typographical error.

For all his gentleness, Davis was unafraid of controversy when he felt that something needed to be said. In 2003, for example, he made his opinion crystal clear about an author who had labored surreptitiously for years to write an assault on the claims of Mormonism while, at the same time, drawing a paycheck from the church, and whose partisans were claiming for him a grossly inflated status as a historian and a scholar.⁹ The following year, he set forth some basic rules for identifying anti-Mormon propaganda and distinguishing it from serious scholarship.¹⁰

7. Davis Bitton, review of *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 1–7.

8. Compare Davis Bitton, “Anti-Intellectualism in Mormon History,” *Dialogue* 1/3 (1966): 111–34, and “Mormon Anti-Intellectualism: A Reply,” *FARMS Review of Books* 13/2 (2001): 59–62.

9. Davis Bitton, “The Charge of a Man with a Broken Lance (But Look What He Doesn't Tell Us),” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 257–71.

10. Davis Bitton, “Spotting an Anti-Mormon Book,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 355–60. And under the pseudonym of Rockwell D. Porter, Davis collaborated with none other than Louis Midgley on “A Dancer/Journalist's Anti-Mormon Diatribe,” *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 259–72.

Davis's own reflections on faith and history appeared in 2004's "I Don't Have a Testimony of the History of the Church."¹¹ A few readers, missing the point of his essay, have again, because of this article, sought to portray him as a closet unbeliever, or, at least, as someone who accorded the founding events of the restoration only metaphorical truth and reality. They misjudge him, absolutely. I knew him for approximately twenty years and had many discussions with him about Mormonism and Mormon history.¹² If Davis Bitton was not a genuine believer, I'm a mushroom.

It was apparent that Davis had health problems, but, nonetheless, his death came as a shock. From an entirely selfish point of view, moreover, there were still other projects in which I hoped to interest him. I have lost a friend, and Mormonism has lost an important voice. We rejoice for him, and pity ourselves.

Mormonism: Academically Respectable?

"There has been much talk among historians of Mormonism," writes John-Charles Duffy in a recent article in the *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*,

about avoiding the "prophet or fraud" polemic surrounding Joseph Smith. But avoiding that polemic is easier said than done. Had Smith confined his claims to visions and revelations, it would have been simpler for "faithful" LDS scholars and others to develop a common discourse predicated on agreement

11. Davis Bitton, "I Don't Have a Testimony of the History of the Church," *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 337–54.

12. Davis also contributed to FARMS publications outside of the *FARMS Review*; see Bitton, "B. H. Roberts and Book of Mormon Scholarship," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 60–69; Bitton, "The Ram and the Lion: Lyman Wight and Brigham Young," in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 37–60. Bitton also served as editor of *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998)—his contributions to that volume included the acknowledgments (pages vii–viii), the introduction (pages ix–xliv), and a chapter entitled "Mormon Funeral Sermons in the Nineteenth Century" (pages 27–50).

that Smith sincerely believed he had seen angels and written texts under inspiration. Matters are complicated, however, by Smith's claim to have possessed golden plates which others claimed to have *handled*. As Terryl Givens has observed, the claim to tangibility presses us out of "the realms of interiority and subjectivity." When witnesses report having hefted something heavy concealed in a box or under cloth, it becomes hard for scholars unconverted to Mormon orthodoxy to avoid the suspicion that, in Richard Bushman's words, "something fishy was going on." The plates are thus a potential "scandal" in the sense of the Greek *skandalon*: a stumbling block to conversation about Mormonism across the religious divide and hence to the mainstreaming of Mormon studies.¹³

A ready comparison can be found in Muhammad, the founding prophet of Islam.¹⁴ Unlike many of those claimed by Joseph Smith, Muhammad's revelations are never received in company with others, and they do not involve tangible objects of reputedly divine origin.¹⁵ While it might be possible to dismiss Muhammad's experiences as merely subjective hallucinations, it is nigh impossible to dismiss

13. John-Charles Duffy, "Just How 'Scandalous' Is the Golden Plates Story? Academic Discourse on the Origin of the Book of Mormon," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 26 (2006): 142. Duffy's citations are, respectively, from Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12, and from Richard Lyman Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 269—both very important works. Duffy's reference to the Book of Mormon witnesses as "having hefted something heavy concealed in a box or under cloth" (while failing to mention their repeated claims of having seen the plates directly and, in the case of the Eight, of having held the plates and turned their leaves) leads me to suspect that he subscribes to Dan Vogel's tendentious revisionism on the subject.

14. I offer a basic narrative biography of the Muslim prophet in Daniel C. Peterson, *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

15. Joseph Smith's shared revelations include (but are not limited to) the experiences of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods (jointly received with Oliver Cowdery), the vision of the three degrees of glory recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 76 (shared with Sidney Rigdon), and the visions of Jehovah, Moses, Elias, and Elijah recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 110 (shared with Oliver Cowdery).

Joseph Smith's claims as based on mere personal delusion since others shared many of his experiences with him at crucial points and since objects like the golden plates and the interpreters or directors, later called Urim and Thummim, seem actually to have existed in objective reality, accessible to others besides Joseph. The contrast with such varied figures as the Buddha, St. John of the Cross, St. Therese of Lisieux, and Plotinus, as well as Muhammad, is patent.

Despite the difficulties inherent in mainstreaming Mormon studies, says Duffy, "a number of faithful scholars appear confident of their ability to credibly voice orthodox claims about the Book of Mormon in non-Mormon academic venues."¹⁶ Duffy cites Noel Reynolds as believing that "we are nearing the point when it might be acceptable for non-LDS academic presses to publish academic books on Book of Mormon topics that would be written from a faithful perspective."¹⁷ Further, Duffy says, "Brigham Young University faculty members John Tvedtnes and Noel Reynolds offer anecdotal evidence that non-Mormon academics are coming to seriously consider LDS scholarship on the Book of Mormon and even to be convinced of the book's antiquity or Hebrew provenance."¹⁸

Duffy disagrees. But with what, precisely, does he disagree? He appears to be inflating the claims made by Tvedtnes and Reynolds beyond what they actually said.¹⁹ Terryl Givens's *By the Hand of*

16. Duffy, "Just How 'Scandalous' Is the Golden Plates Story?" 142.

17. Duffy, "Just How 'Scandalous' Is the Golden Plates Story?" 143.

18. Duffy, "Just How 'Scandalous' Is the Golden Plates Story?" 142–43. Actually, just to be precise, although John Tvedtnes was, until his recent retirement, employed by FARMS and then by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, he was never a member of the BYU faculty.

19. Duffy's readings are sometimes unreliable. For example, he misguidedly conflates the positions of Louis Midgley and David Bohn on the question of historical objectivity (Duffy, 156–57 n. 59)—a surprisingly common mistake, given the distinct differences between the two. And he portrays me as rather giddily "excited" by Terryl Givens's *By the Hand of Mormon* (Duffy, 157 n. 61). I do indeed like the book very much, but, so far as I can tell, my pulse remained fairly calm throughout my reading of it. "BYU's John Clark affirmed, during the Joseph Smith symposium at the Library of Congress in May 2005, that archaeological evidence compels the conclusion that the Book of Mormon is an ancient record translated through supernatural means" (Duffy, 160). "I can't imagine using this language," wrote Professor Clark in a personal e-mail response to me (dated 16 April 2007) when I asked him about this summary of his alleged view. "I looked it

Mormon and, to a lesser degree, Richard Bushman's *Believing History* seem to indicate that it may indeed be gradually becoming acceptable for secular academic presses to publish academic books on Book of Mormon topics that are written from a faithful perspective. But Reynolds has never suggested that mainstream academic presses will soon be eager purveyors of Mormon apologetics and advocacy. Nor has he claimed that significant numbers of non-LDS scholars accept Joseph Smith's claims about supernatural events. He has simply noted, with specific illustrations, that certain prominent academics, seriously reading the Book of Mormon for the first time, have acknowledged its depth, complexity, and richness. Likewise, John Tvedtnes has related particular personal experiences in which he understood Chaim Rabin and David Flusser, two very significant Israeli scholars who are now deceased, to allow the distinct possibility that Latter-day Saint claims have authentic roots in ancient Judaism. He has never declared that such sentiments are common in academia, let alone universal.

Duffy further observes that,

in light of Givens' assertion that the eight witnesses' testimony is "perhaps the most extensive and yet contentious body of evidence in support of the tactile reality of supernaturally conveyed artifacts that we have in the modern age," it is striking that most non-Mormon scholars writing on the Book of Mormon do not attempt to come to terms with that evidence. Most non-Mormon scholars, it would seem, do not regard the witnesses as a challenge that must be answered.²⁰

up: 'The scientific trend of archaeological evidence of its historic facticity indicates that the Book of Mormon is what Joseph Smith claimed it was—an ancient book.' In science, few things are compelling. I guess this statement is closer to my views than the alternative." Clark was referring to his own summary in "Archaeological Trends and the Book of Mormon Origins," in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2005), 98.

20. Duffy, "Just How 'Scandalous' Is the Golden Plates Story?" 158–59. Duffy is citing Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 22. Givens makes a similar point in his important but relatively neglected work, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 91.

I agree with Duffy on this point. Occasionally, I'm even puzzled by the phenomenon. But I've long since ceased to be surprised by it. Many years ago, while visiting from the east coast, a non-Mormon professor who has written on Latter-day Saint history came to my house as the guest of a member of our monthly (GPMCS) reading group. At one point during the evening discussion, expressing weary boredom with regard to the issue of Mormonism's truth claims, he declared that the historical study of Mormonism ought rather to focus on such questions as the origin of the Mormon ecclesiastical unit called a *ward*. I suspect that his lack of interest in Mormon religious claims reflects a presupposition, on his part, that the question of those claims has already been settled in the negative. Joseph Smith's supernatural assertions, from his vantage point, are self-evidently false; genuine scholarly investigation of them is a waste of time.

Duffy continues by pointing out that, "in the non-Mormon academy, [Terryl Givens's] *By the Hand of Mormon* has been essentially ignored, a . . . sign of faithful scholarship's detachment from academic conversation."²¹ Of course, the "detachment," if his claim is true (and I have not verified it), is on the side of the secular or, at any rate, the non-Mormon academy, rather than on that of "faithful scholarship." Publishing a sympathetic reading of the Book of Mormon and attendant issues with Oxford University Press—arguably the most prestigious academic press in the English-speaking world—hardly suggests any effort on the part of Terryl Givens to avoid the gaze of the scholarly mainstream. Whether the scholarly mainstream takes notice or not is beyond his (or our) power to control.

While faithful perspectives on Mormon claims may, thus far, not attract the attention of large numbers of non-LDS academics, Mormonism is not entirely ignored in scholarly writing and publishing. However, when it is mentioned, its truth claims are either passed over in silence or implicitly assumed (or expressly declared) to be false. As Duffy correctly notes with respect to academic protocol and convention, "A lack of symmetry exists: scholars may openly argue

21. Duffy, "Just How 'Scandalous' Is the Golden Plates Story?" 158.

against the orthodox account of the Book of Mormon but faithful scholars may not openly argue for it.”²²

This seems to have been the case even in the Public Broadcasting System documentary *The Mormons* that was aired throughout the United States on 30 April and 1 May 2007. Among its several grave and conspicuous flaws, the film allowed several of its non-LDS and ex-LDS interviewees to assert Mormonism’s alleged falsity and lack of supporting evidence, but no believing Latter-day Saint was allowed (on screen, anyway) to affirm the contrary, let alone to provide a substantial rebuttal to those assertions. (As one of those who appeared in both parts of the film, I can definitively state that at least one interviewee would have been willing to do just that. Indeed, although the vast bulk of my lengthy interviews with Helen Whitney obviously ended up on the cutting-room floor, I seem to recall speaking to those very topics.)²³ The sense given by the film, and probably the presumption shared by its producers and authors, is that, while Mormonism may well give meaning and comfort to those who believe in it and are capable of living by its standards, those believers are, in the end, mistaken or irrational. The question of Mormon truth claims has already been answered, and in the negative. It requires no actual attention.

Now, admittedly, the academic mainstream and the leadership of PBS probably don’t regard Mormon belief as substantially more irrational than most other religious belief. *The Mormons* more than once observed that other faiths, mainstream Christianity among them, have had to grow beyond their founding stories, and suggested that, if Mormonism is to survive, it too will have to reinterpret or even jettison its original claims.²⁴ In any case, vocal advocacy of such claims as non-metaphorical is considered by many in the academic and journalistic elite to be, at a minimum, in very poor taste and rather embarrassing

22. Duffy, “Just How ‘Scandalous’ Is the Golden Plates Story?” 160.

23. For a more complete transcript of several interviews, see www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews (accessed 8 May 2007).

24. See the interview with Jon Butler at www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews (accessed 8 May 2007).

(while skepticism about them would surely not be). And this is not true only with regard to Mormonism.²⁵

Quite a few years ago, returning from the annual joint national meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, I found myself seated on a flight (from Boston, if I recall correctly) next to the then-president of the Evangelical Theological Society. As our conversation proceeded, he mentioned that, in one of the conference sessions he had attended, an adherent of Wicca (a modern and, in my opinion, quite inauthentic and ahistorical version of “witchcraft”) had borne a kind of testimony from the podium, as part of her academic presentation. She found her religious preference liberating, empowering, satisfying. The audience, even the non-Wiccans among them, appeared to take her comments completely in stride. However, my evangelical seatmate speculated that, by contrast, if he ever chose to affirm his faith and to speak of his trust in Jesus as his personal savior before such an academic gathering, his remarks would be considered a gross breach of scholarly protocol.

I concurred, and told him so. Why the difference? I suppose that it’s because few in the academy take Wicca seriously as a theology. And, in fact, many of its adherents probably don’t take its doctrinal assertions about “the Goddess” as more than metaphor and poetic symbol, either. Yet theologically and politically liberal non-Wiccans in academia are inclined to approve of it, or at least to tolerate it benignly, as feminist, progressive, and subversive of conservative male hegemony, capitalism, and who knows what else. Christianity, however, represents the “Establishment,” the dominant influence in Western culture for nearly the past two thousand years—a force that is itself, quite absurdly, often held to be responsible for nearly all the evil, oppression, sexism, injustice, violence, and environmental degradation that has occurred on the planet.²⁶ Its disciples, particularly in the growing and vocal evangelical wing of the Protestant movement and in the powerful, hierarchical

25. This is probably one of the points to take away from Hugh Hewitt’s *A Mormon in the White House? Ten Things Every American Should Know about Mitt Romney* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2007).

26. Rodney Stark’s *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005), is just one of several

Roman Catholic Church, tend to take its claims as literally true rather than merely poetically symbolic. The American cultural and intellectual elite are far more frightened of what they believe to be a looming Christian theocracy than of a resurgence of “witchcraft.”

How does Mormonism fit into this? While evangelical detractors of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints insist that it is non-Christian, even pagan, secularists (who pay no attention to evangelical polemicists in any case) are not fooled. A hierarchical, corporate, powerful, patriarchal, literalizing, aggressively missionizing movement like Mormonism represents everything they fear and despise in Christianity generally—but in a much more concentrated form than usual. Moreover, the recent historical origins of Mormonism and the tangibility of Mormon claims force the issue of truth or falsity far more acutely than happens, say, with the ancient and historically irretrievable origins of Christianity itself.

To cite a recent example: Writing in *Slate*—a daily online magazine “offering analysis and commentary about politics, news, and culture”—in December 2006, Jacob Weisberg argued that Mitt Romney should be rejected as a candidate for the United States presidency on religious grounds. Anybody who believes “the founding whoppers of Mormonism” is, he suggested, manifestly unqualified to lead the nation. The Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, Weisberg wrote, “was an obvious con man. Romney has every right to believe in con men, but I want to know if he does, and if so, I don’t want him running the country.” From the perspective of a devout secularist like Weisberg, though, ideas like the resurrection and the miraculous parting of the Red Sea are no less absurd than Joseph Smith’s golden plates. Weisberg views reliance upon religious faith in general, not merely Mormonism, “as an alternative to rational understanding of complex issues.” (He offers George Bush’s Methodism as another example of frightening religious fanaticism.) Weisberg regards *all* religious doctrines as “dogmatic, irrational, and absurd. By holding them, someone indicates a basic failure to think for himself or see the world as it is.” More commonly

excellent correctives to this nonsensical but, in academia, surprisingly widespread view of human history.

held creeds have simply been granted an unmerited patina of respectability by the sheer passage of time. “Perhaps Christianity and Judaism are merely more venerable and poetic versions of the same. But a few eons makes a big difference.”²⁷

A Test Case

The publication of Richard Bushman’s long-awaited *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* in 2005 occasioned a great deal of discussion in Latter-day Saint circles and a certain degree even beyond.²⁸ Not surprisingly, it also inspired reflections by Bushman himself. Some of his meditations have now been made available in a remarkably candid limited-edition memoir entitled *On the Road with Joseph Smith: An Author’s Diary*.²⁹

For much of the first part of the memoir, which is really a collection of diary entries, Bushman is anticipating the reviews of his book, the first copies of which had arrived from the publisher on 2 September 2005. He dreads them, largely (though not entirely) for reasons already alluded to here.

I will be subject to public humiliation. . . . I keep thinking of the *New York Times* review when it comes. More likely than not, it will go to someone who thinks Joseph Smith was a scoundrel and the Mormons fanatics. . . . They will think my book is a celebration and anything but a balanced history. My works and I will be demeaned in the public prints.³⁰

I know it is going to be given only grudging respect in many of the reviews. There will not be the excitement and enthusiasm

27. Jacob Weisberg, “Romney’s Religion: A Mormon President? No Way,” *Slate*, 20 December 2006, online at www.slate.com/id/2155902 (accessed 7 May 2007).

28. Richard Lyman Bushman: *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005); a paperback version was released in March 2007.

29. Richard Lyman Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith: An Author’s Diary* (New York: Mormon Artists Group, 2006). One hundred copies of this book were made available to the public. I will, however, with the recent release of a more accessible edition, cite from the 2007 version published by Greg Kofford Books.

30. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 25 (13 September 2005).

Jim [Lucas, a Latter-day Saint friend] and others expect. . . . I feel myself hunkering down, waiting for the blows to fall.³¹

By 24 September, roughly three weeks after he had seen the first copy of his book, the reviews were beginning to trickle in.

I realize I don't like to read any kind of review, even the favorable ones. I am annoyed by what the reviewers choose to emphasize in Joseph's life. Most of them pick up a few fragments and present them as if they were the key elements. There is something so cavalier about the implicit assertion that they have delivered the essence of the man.³²

Speaking to a small group of Latter-day Saint academics and graduate students in the Boston area on 6 October 2005,

I posed the question whether a book about Joseph Smith written by a Mormon can be useful to non-Mormons. I thought, of course, it could until George Marsden said this is a biography for Mormons only, a theme repeated at the John Whitmer panel last week. Too sympathetic, bordering on the apologetic, I guess they have concluded. In my heart of hearts, I say to myself, you don't like it because you don't like Joseph Smith. You want him to be an impostor and a scoundrel; and when I make him something more, you conclude I am an apologist. . . . Joseph Smith is simply too far off the map for serious consideration. Anyone who tries to bring him back on the map must be a partisan.³³

The Harvard religious historian Robert Orsi, who also writes empathetically, has observed that his critics object to his sympathetic portrayals of people's religious faith and practices. The fact that he is a substantial scholar with standing in the

31. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 28–29 (19 September 2005).

32. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 31–32 (24 September 2005).

33. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 43–44 (6 October 2005).

profession makes him all the more dangerous and annoying to the skeptics.³⁴

There is a manifest asymmetry between academia's easy tolerance of expressions of skepticism about religious claims and its general discomfort at affirmative religious advocacy. In the case of Bushman's *Rough Stone Rolling*, my hunch is that dominant attitudes toward religion among the academic/intellectual elite class combine unhealthily with another tendency to torpedo his chances for an enthusiastic reception: While tell-all biographies reflecting disdain for their subject are often quite acceptable, admiring biographies, where the author plainly likes the person about whom he's writing, tend to be dismissed as uncritical and unscholarly hagiographies.

A comment on quite a different topic by the well-known British philosopher Mary Midgley may be apropos here. Writing about scientific attitudes toward animals, she says:

What is really worrying at present is the impression many people have that the revulsion is somehow more scientific than the affection and respect. This idea rests on two very strange suppositions: first, that science ought not to be inspired by any emotion, and secondly, that disgust and contempt are not emotions, whereas love and admiration are. It would seem to follow that all enquirers who have worked out of pure admiration for their subject-matter, from the Greek astronomers gazing at the stars to field naturalists who love their birds and beetles, would be anti-scientific, and ought if possible to be replaced by others who are indifferent to these things, or who actively dislike them.³⁵

Bushman argues, in fact, that the exceptional nature of Joseph Smith's stories makes historical work by a believing historian all the more useful and important:

34. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 25 (13 September 2005).

35. Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2003), 148.

One reason is that skepticism about the gold plates and the visions can easily slip over into cynicism. The assumption that Smith concocted the stories of angels and plates casts a long shadow over his entire life. Everything he did is thrown into doubt. His exhortations to godly service, his self-sacrifice, his pious letters to his wife, his apparent love for his fellow workers all appear as manipulations to perpetuate a grand scheme. Cynicism has its advantages in smoking out hypocrisy but it does not foster sympathetic understanding. Every act is prejudged from the beginning.³⁶

Dan Vogel's conviction that Joseph Smith was a fraud, albeit a "pious" one, and that his religious claims are false, illustrates this nicely. The plates of the Book of Mormon, in Vogel's view, must accordingly never have existed, or else they were hammered-tin frauds, and the witnesses, however credible the historical record may show them to have been, must necessarily have been hallucinating if they were not flatly lying. The alternative is simply unacceptable to Vogel. He is an atheist. There is no God and, therefore, no divine revelation. (Admittedly, in a certain respect such a viewpoint greatly simplifies the task of a historian dealing with religious claims.)

"My advantage as a practicing Mormon," writes Bushman,

is that I believe enough to take Joseph Smith seriously. If a writer begins with the idea that Smith was a fraud who perpetrated a hoax upon the gullible public with his story of gold plates and ancient Israelites in America, nothing he did can be trusted. Every act, every thought is undercut by his presumed fraudulent beginnings. That overhanging doubt makes it difficult for a skeptical biographer to find much of interest in Smith's writings or to explain why thousands of people believed him. What of value is to be expected from the theological meanderings of a charlatan?

A few empathetic historians like Jan Shipps have written with great insight about early Mormonism, but more often than

36. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 124–25 (August 2006).

not, skeptical historians brush Joseph Smith's writings aside as banal or vapid. Fawn Brodie, author of a widely accepted biography of Smith, found his religion faintly ridiculous. Her *No Man Knows My History* summarized his teachings only to dismiss them as derivative or strange. She could not explain why thousands of converts to Mormonism devoted their lives to building a Zion in the Great Basin, or what was so enthralling in Smith's vision of a God who was once a man. A more recent biography, Dan Vogel's *The Making of a Prophet*, intensely scrutinizes the Book of Mormon but finds nothing compelling or profound in it.³⁷

Eventually, the reviews of Bushman's new biography began to arrive in greater numbers. Laurie Maffly-Kipp, for example, who teaches religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, responded to *Rough Stone Rolling* in the evangelical review *Books and Culture*. Joseph Smith's 2005 bicentennial, she wrote, provided believers an opportunity to "resuscitate the scholarly respectability of their leader"—as if Joseph Smith had ever enjoyed any notable degree of "respectability" in academic circles.³⁸ She pronounced Bushman's biography "an excellent study, well-researched and adroitly narrated," "beautifully written."

Bushman, equally at home within the university and the Mormon tabernacle, has three essential goals in this work. First, he seeks to explore faithfully the story of Joseph Smith's life. He attempts, in his words, "to think as Smith thought" in an effort to explain his actions and the development of the Mormon movement between 1820 and 1844. Second, Bushman strives to present an apologia to a secular and often hostile world. Thus, he labors to convey the reasonableness, coherence, and historicity of Smith's doctrinal world. Finally,

37. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 125 (August 2006).

38. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, "Who's That on the \$50 Bill? Placing Joseph Smith in America's Story," *Books & Culture* 12 (January/February 2006): 11. All quotations from Maffly-Kipp come from the same page.

Bushman wants to legitimate Smith's importance beyond the Mormon world by situating him within a pantheon of American icons, as well as within the broader currents of Western civilization. Bushman wants to make Joseph Smith more than Mormon.

Ultimately, though, Maffly-Kipp found *Rough Stone Rolling* unsatisfactory. For one thing, it wasn't negative enough. "From an academic perspective," she observed, "Bushman's is a rosy rendering. . . . Almost invariably, he assumes that Joseph (unlike most mortals) had only the best motives and intentions." Although she acknowledges that "Bushman edges about as close to the divide as he possibly can," her reading of *Rough Stone Rolling* left Maffly-Kipp "wondering whether it is even possible to write a biography of Joseph Smith, Jr., that is persuasive to both believers and nonbelievers."

Reading her review left Richard Bushman wondering the same thing. He thought Maffly-Kipp a friend (and, presumably, still does), but was surprised by her response to his book:

The review tells me that we cannot expect a positive reaction to the biography—or to Joseph Smith—from scholars. As Laurie says, an epistemological gap yawns between my view of the Prophet and that of most academics. Believing Mormons stand on the other side of a gulf separating us from most educated people. . . .

I had hoped my book would bridge this gap, but after this review, I can see it will go only part way. I will be consistently seen as a partisan observer.³⁹

"I am surely as sympathetic a nonbeliever as they come," wrote Maffly-Kipp. "But I often found that Bushman, rather than finding an intellectual meeting point for the Mormon faithful and the children

39. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 102 (8 January 2006). "Brodie has shaped the view of the Prophet for half a century," he writes on the same page. "Nothing we have written has challenged her domination. I had hoped my book would displace hers, but at best it will only be a contender in the ring, whereas before she reigned unchallenged."

of the secular Enlightenment (if not the evangelical set—but that may be asking far too much), wanted to have the best of both worlds. He wanted both inspiration and rational discourse.”

Her apparent assumption that rational discourse and inspiration are radically incompatible, that to accept the one is somehow to reject the other, is striking. She proceeds to declare, probably correctly, that, in order to earn a secular historian’s acceptance, “Smith’s revelations would need to be explained materially as a product of his cultural or physical environment.” Some have gone still further, seeming to deny that anybody, no matter how learned or rigorous, can be a real historian without subscribing, at least in his or her scholarly life, to the ideology of naturalism. Thus, for instance, Norman Murdoch, writing about Joseph Smith and Mormonism in 1986, after citing Cushing Strout’s dictum that “the historian is necessarily secularist,” offered the definition that “being an historian means explaining the past in human terms.”⁴⁰ Accordingly, if the Strout-Murdoch decree is granted, a legitimate historian, it appears, must presume (whatever his or her private beliefs) that Muhammad did not actually receive revelation, that John Newton experienced no genuinely divine “amazing grace” during a storm at sea, that the Buddha attained no true enlightenment, that Jesus didn’t really rise from the dead. All such notions must be treated as false. Real historical scholarship knows that they stem, without any exceptions, from confusion, error, deception, or hallucination.

It is far from clear, however, how historians know this prior to historical investigation—solidly indisputable conclusions about religious truth claims seem unlikely enough even *following* such investigation—and it is not at all obvious that believing Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others are obliged to pretend to be atheists in order to gain admission to the historical club. A naturalistic understanding of the universe is an ideological position, a worldview. It doesn’t flow in any obvious and uncontroversial way from the historical “facts.” Except in the most obvious cases, as the Oxford philosopher and theologian Keith Ward

40. Norman H. Murdoch, “Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and Mormonism: A Review Essay,” *New York History* 67 (1986): 224, 230.

has observed, a choice between fundamentally different worldviews “cannot be based on evidence, for they determine what is going to count as evidence, and how evidence is going to be interpreted.”⁴¹ Asserting absolute naturalism as the *sine qua non* of genuine historiography seems little more than an attempt to gain an advantage for a secular worldview by definitional fiat. (Once more, skepticism about religious claims appears to be academically legitimate, while religious belief is not.) Moreover, and very ironically, it is without historical basis: Herodotus, Plutarch, Eusebius, al-Tabari, and the Venerable Bede are far from the only great historians who have written quite openly as believers. While Maffly-Kipp is right in saying that “a yawning epistemological divide . . . has separated sacred history from its secular counterpart for over a century,” at least two and a half millennia of historiography failed to insist on that allegedly unbridgeable gulf.⁴²

Although I’ve grown somewhat embarrassed at citing Dale Morgan’s 15 December 1945 letter to the believing Latter-day Saint historian Juanita Brooks so frequently, its continuing relevance makes such citation unavoidable. Morgan, an atheist who hoped to write a scholarly treatment of early Mormonism (but died in 1971 without having made much serious progress on the project), candidly indicated his awareness 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 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. You in your turn will always be on the other side of that Great Divide.⁴³

41. Keith Ward, *Is Religion Dangerous?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 96.

42. On allegiance to value-neutral historiography as a recent aberration, see David B. Honey and Daniel C. Peterson, “Advocacy and Inquiry in the Writing of Latter-day Saint History,” *BYU Studies* 31/2 (1991): 139–79.

43. The letter is transcribed in *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History*, ed. John Phillip Walker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 84–91, where the quoted passage occurs on page 87. As ever, my thanks go to Gary Novak for first calling

I can think of no convincing reason why Dale Morgan's side of the "Great Divide" should be privileged over Juanita Brooks's side.

Finally, the long-awaited *New York Times* review arrived, written by Walter Kirn. A writer of fiction rather than a historian or scholar, Kirn's only significant relevant credential appears to be that he is a disaffected Latter-day Saint. (Bushman had first encountered him via a short story, in the *New Yorker*, with a Mormon setting. The story struck Bushman as "vicious.") Claudia Bushman and Jed Woodworth quite liked the review, but Richard Bushman "thought this was another case like Brodie's where personal history sours the author's outlook on the Prophet."⁴⁴

"By showing the inadequacy of reason in the face of spiritual phenomena," Kirn rather oddly observed of *Rough Stone Rolling*—which is, after all, a biography of Joseph Smith rather than a venture in philosophy or theology—"Bushman seems to be playing a Latter-day-Saint Aquinas." (Those familiar with the massive works of St. Thomas Aquinas would surely have been surprised at this bizarre characterization of one of the most rigorously logical writers in human history, heir to the recovered legacy of Aristotelian logic and philosophy as well as of the efforts of the great Islamo-Arabic philosophers and of his own highly rational Christian teachers and predecessors.) In the same strange vein, Kirn—who really does seem to have imagined that he was reviewing a philosophical treatise rather than a biography of a historical person—sneeringly remarked that "since logic played almost no part in Joseph Smith's life, it may be fitting that it's largely absent from this respectful biography as well." "It appears," Kirn continued, ostensibly about Richard Bushman, "he wants to usher in a subtle, mature new age of Mormon thought—rigorous yet not impious—akin to what smart Roman Catholics have had for centuries."⁴⁵

my attention to this remarkably revealing comment. For an example of a contemporary writer on Mormonism who falls squarely on the totally secular side of that divide, see the discussion of Dan Vogel in Daniel C. Peterson, "The Witchcraft Paradigm: On Claims to 'Second Sight' by People Who Say It Doesn't Exist," *FARMS Review* 18/2 (2006): liii–lxiii.

44. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 103 (17 January 2006).

45. Walter Kirn, "Latter-day Saint," *New York Times Book Review*, 15 January 2006. As an illustration of the supposed lack of logic in *Rough Stone Rolling*, Kirn writes that

Kirn's was an exceedingly strange review, but it was far less eccentric than the one published earlier in the *New York Review of Books* by Larry McMurtry, who, like Kirn, is neither a historian nor any other kind of scholar but, on top of that, lacks even a transient connection with Mormonism.⁴⁶ (The choice of Kirn and McMurtry as reviewers seems, to me, to send a rather unsubtle message of disdain for Mormonism on the part of the *New York Times Book Review* and the *New York Review of Books*. A scholarly biography by a leading academic historian deserved review by scholars.) McMurtry was most likely invited to review *Rough Stone Rolling* because Mormons are headquartered in the American West and because he's a writer of Western novels. It seems not to have mattered to the editors of the *New York Review of Books* that Joseph Smith was a New Englander whose church began in New York and who never came further west than Missouri.

"Once," McMurtry irrelevantly informed his readers,

long ago, I dined in the fine restaurant atop the Hotel Utah. Beyond the spires of the Tabernacle I saw the sun setting over the Great Salt Lake. At the table next to mine, in a wheelchair, sat an obviously dying *capo*, rolling his bread into little balls and dipping them in a bowl of milk, while two dark-suited goodfellas took his hoarse instruction.

The anecdote was evidently intended to demonstrate McMurtry's scholarly bona fides. Unlike most of his audience, probably, he has actually been to Salt Lake City. In fact, he's eaten in a restaurant there. Once upon a time, long ago. He even knows that the Tabernacle has

"for Bushman, the fact that his church continues to grow is proof that [Joseph Smith] was onto something big. . . . For logicians, this is tantamount to arguing that Santa Claus probably exists because he gets millions of letters each year from children." I confess that, if Professor Bushman made such an argument, I missed it. However, while I certainly don't think that success demonstrates truth, I'm inclined to think that any ideological movement, religious or otherwise, that appeals to large numbers of people over many generations is indeed "onto something." Much like long-lived classics in music, art, and literature—and, yes, much like the beloved figure of Santa Claus—such movements wouldn't survive if they didn't have something meaningful to say.

46. Larry McMurtry, "Angel in America," *New York Review of Books*, 17 November 2005, 35–37.

spires. Thus, when he speaks about Joseph Smith, he speaks with unique authority.

But the tale, such as it is, rings false. What in the world is a Mormon *capo*, and how do the uninitiated recognize one? And why use the jargon of a Sicilian crime syndicate in this context? Let's suppose, for a moment, that McMurtry really did overhear an unnamed presiding official of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints doing an impersonation of Marlon Brando while enjoying a gourmet meal of bread and milk in a relatively elegant Salt Lake City restaurant at some unspecified time in the past. And let's assume that, somehow (perhaps by means of the elderly cleric's papal tiara or in view of the man's rich scarlet vestments), McMurtry knew who he was and what rank he held. And let us suppose that the old priest really was there with his two counselors, his *consiglieri* (from the Latin *cōnsiliārius*; compare *cōnsilium*, "advice," "counsel"), rather than the family members with whom I've typically seen Church leaders in Salt Lake City restaurants and at local public events (as recently as last night). Why call them "goodfellas"? Why insinuate a link with the Mafia? And what on earth did any of this have to do with the biography of Joseph Smith?

Compounded with his manifest contempt, McMurtry simply doesn't know much about Mormonism. "In the *Book of Mormon*," he wrote, "the biblical Ishmael, son of Abraham, soon appears and helps the questing Nephi out of a spot of trouble with the locals." But, of course, the biblical Ishmael never appears in the Book of Mormon, and it isn't clear what help "with the locals" is given to Nephi by the entirely distinct Ishmael who *does* appear.⁴⁷

47. Such uncertain grasp of details ought to inspire modesty when it comes to drawing big conclusions. But it seldom does. Thus, for example, the militantly atheistic Christopher Hitchens, in his new book *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), offers a learned aside about Mormonism in which trusting readers discover, among other things, that Nephi was the son of "Lephi," that "Cumora" was the site of a "made-up battle," that "Smith refused to show the golden plates to anybody," that Fawn Brodie had a doctorate, and that "every week, at special ceremonies in Mormon temples, the congregations meet and are given a certain quota of names of the departed to 'pray in' to their church" (see pp. 167–68). Mormonism, Hitchens concludes from his rigorous research, supplies an unusually clear illustration of the fraudulence of all religion.

But McMurtry didn't *need* to know anything because the claims of Mormonism are, for him, transparently false. "Nearly a dozen men, some of them Joseph's scribes, claimed to have seen the plates, but," McMurtry told the gullible readers of the *New York Review of Books*, "their claims inspire no confidence. It's not really clear that anyone except Joseph Smith and the angel Moroni really saw the plates, if there were plates—a big if." McMurtry offered no argument. He provided not so much as a hint of the extensive research and reading, and the serious engagement with the scholarship of Richard Lloyd Anderson and Larry Morris and others, that would necessarily have to undergird his sweeping dismissal if it were worthy of being taken seriously. Once again, it seems likely that he has rejected Latter-day Saint claims a priori. No serious consideration is needed. The extraordinarily impressive and consistent testimonies of the Book of Mormon witnesses were simply, casually, swept aside. "It's possible," allowed McMurtry, "that, at first, Joseph Smith didn't take his own prattle about an angel all that seriously; but, hey! people not only believed it, they lapped it up. The ability to be convinced by one's own statements is probably essential to prophets [note, here, McMurtry's implicit general disdain for religious claims], and Joseph Smith had this ability."

Bushman was not pleased by the McMurtry review. In an entry in his diary for 28 October 2005, he remarked that

The biggest disappointment is that McMurtry did not find a thing in the book to cause him to reconsider—or even to see a problem in—his understanding of Joseph. My guess is that he read only the first part of the book and the sections on plural marriage. That is all he talked about.⁴⁸

"I am getting pretty indifferent to the reviews," Bushman told his diary on 1 November 2005. "They are pretty much what I expected. People with a preformed view of Joseph as scoundrel will object; Mormons who like Joseph Smith will take a deep breath and learn from my portrayal."⁴⁹

48. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 63 (28 October 2005).

49. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 65 (1 November 2005).

But McMurtry's review continued to rankle. "All McMurtry could talk about," Bushman wrote later, "was the plates and plural marriage, the two most sensational points of Joseph's career. Nothing else about the Prophet interested him."⁵⁰

"Mormons," Bushman reflected,

want Joseph to get the respect he never had before. I think that instead I am digging up the many layers of suspicion bordering on scorn. We get treated politely most of the time, so we live under the illusion Joseph is looked on respectfully. My serious effort to present him as a notable and honorable man brings out the hidden disrespect. . . .

. . . [T]he reactions to *RSR* show just how deep the gulf is. Mormons, including myself, think we are speaking rationally and persuasively about the Prophet when outsiders think we are in left field.⁵¹

A number of years ago, I attended a small regional academic conference at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver. At one point, I came into the back of a room where a session was already underway. The topic of the presentation was a psychology-of-religion attempt to define "religious maturity." It turned out that, according to the presenter, belief in an anthropomorphic deity and in a relationship to God as child to Father are among the marks of an immature spirituality. Afterwards, during the question-and-answer period, a professor from the University of Utah indicated that, very possibly, a majority of her students believed that God is indeed anthropomorphic and that he is their Father. What, she wondered, should be her response to this problem?

The audience erupted. "Don't the Mormons have any concept of idolatry?" demanded one. Another informed the professor from Salt Lake City that it was her duty to educate her students out of these absurd and contemptible beliefs. (To her credit, she responded that she didn't think that the taxpayers of Utah had hired her to destroy the

50. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 77 (26 October 2005).

51. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 80–81 (16 November 2005).

faith of their sons and daughters.) I sat in the back, unnoticed, stunned by what was being said by people with whom I had shared panels and lunches at several of these annual meetings. It continued for several minutes, growing worse and worse. Finally, a non-LDS acquaintance from Boise State noticed me and motioned ever more insistently that I should speak up. So I did. “I thought you should know,” I said, “before this goes any further, that there is at least one spiritually immature idolater in the back of the room.”

There was a very brief and very awkward silence, and then several of those present began to fall over themselves to insist that they respect Mormons greatly and (I’m not making this up) that some of their best friends are Mormons. But I had learned something very valuable during those few minutes of comment, and I’m under absolutely no illusions about the prevailing attitudes among academics toward Mormonism.

Eventually, feedback on *Rough Stone Rolling* began to come in from cultural Mormons. (Although Walter Kirn comes from a Mormon background, he does not seem to identify himself any longer in any substantial way with Mormon culture.) I will examine a representative sample of that feedback.

First, Roger Launius. Richard Bushman characterizes Launius quite aptly as a “critic of Joseph Smith from a Community of Christ background. He sees few redeeming features in the Prophet.”⁵² Launius is not entirely wrong when, in a review published in the *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, he asserts that Latter-day Saint believers tend to “assign near infallible status to the actions of imminently [*sic*] fallible human beings such as the Mormon prophet.”⁵³ While I see this tendency as relatively uncommon among scholars and sophisticated laypeople, though, Launius suggests that it dominates believing Saints generally, including their academic historians. In particular, he faults Bushman’s biography as “a loving tribute to the legend of Smith,” “a retelling of a specific myth.” Lamenting what he calls “the

52. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 36 (1 October 2005).

53. Roger D. Launius, “Defending the Prophet,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 26 (2006): 314.

book's basically reverent approach," Launius explains that "Bushman struggles to maintain an epic aura."⁵⁴ "At his worst," Launius says, "he is an apologist for a simplistic, faithful master narrative of the rise of the religion and the life of its founder. Bushman is more often an apologist than not."⁵⁵ "The Joseph Smith of *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* has a much more smoothly polished surface than appropriate, probably one so polished as to be unrecognizable either to the historic Joseph Smith or the people surrounding him."⁵⁶ (Strikingly, many believing Latter-day Saints have been disturbed by precisely the opposite perception; while Roger Launius thinks *Rough Stone Rolling* too kind toward Joseph Smith, probably the most common worry about the book among faithful Mormons has been that it presented too human a prophet.)

"Duke University professor Alex Roland once said of books like this," Launius declares, "that it is not so much history as it is a restatement of 'tribal rituals, meant to comfort the old and indoctrinate the young.'"⁵⁷ Once again, we see the nakedly ideological presumption that believers, no matter how well qualified, no matter how careful and rigorous, cannot, as believers, write "real" history. "It will be uniquely satisfying to believing Latter-day Saints, infuriating to those knowledgeable about his life but less committed to the faith founded by him, and perplexing to the larger historical community."⁵⁸

Here let me comment, parenthetically, that I hope that Joseph Smith *will* be perplexing to others. He *should* be. Unless and until onlookers come to grips with his claims—in my view, until they *accept* them—they should continue to find him baffling. No Latter-

54. Launius, "Defending the Prophet," 314. As a former classics student who spent a great deal of time on Homer and Virgil and who has just, for reasons of my own, finished reading Anthony Esolen's new translation of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, R. K. Narayan's prose retelling of the *Ramayana*, and Burton Raffel's new version of *Das Nibelungenlied* within the past weeks, I confess that I have little or no precise idea what Launius may mean by this. Presumably he does.

55. Launius, "Defending the Prophet," 315.

56. Launius, "Defending the Prophet," 314.

57. Launius, "Defending the Prophet," 314. He is citing Alex Roland, "How We Won the Moon," *New York Times Book Review*, 17 July 1994, 1.

58. Launius, "Defending the Prophet," 314.

day Saint is obligated to make Joseph Smith completely acceptable to people who reject Joseph's claims. And, as I've noted above, no historian is obliged to explain religious claims away simply in order to satisfy atheists and agnostics.

Launius appears to insinuate that *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* is part of a broad church-orchestrated campaign to whitewash and falsify history:

LDS Apostle Boyd K. Packer has even invoked an espousal of the progress of Mormonism as a religion as *the* primary purpose of historical investigation, telling church educators in 1981 that “Your objective should be that they [those who study Mormon history] will see the hand of the Lord in every hour and every moment of the Church from its beginning till now.”⁵⁹

Launius apparently opposes anything that savors of apologetics. Bushman, says Launius, is “most assuredly misinformed” in saying that those who defend the Book of Mormon believe themselves to be building a cumulative case of probabilities and do not imagine themselves to have attained to decisive proof. “If there is one thing that Louis Midgley and the lords of FARMS are convinced of, it is that their ‘case is conclusive’ and that all should agree with them.”⁶⁰ (However, it is Roger Launius who is mistaken on this point, and not Richard Bushman.) Unsurprisingly, Launius rejects the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. To question the book's historicity, he announces, “does not cast into doubt the legitimacy of the religion nearly so much as Bushman seems to believe. All religions—all ideologies—are predicated on myth and symbol and they are not any less useful, compelling, and true because of it.”⁶¹

59. Launius, “Defending the Prophet,” 316, brackets in the original. Launius cites Boyd K. Packer, “The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect,” *BYU Studies* 21/3 (1981): 259–78 (quotation on p. 262). It isn't obvious, by the way, that an exhortation to church educators can legitimately be read—though it commonly is, by critics—as a command aimed at scholarly researchers. The two professions have quite different functions and obligations.

60. Launius, “Defending the Prophet,” 317.

61. Launius, “Defending the Prophet,” 317.

Well, yes and no. Would it really make no difference to Christianity, say, if it were somehow proven that the resurrection, and indeed the life, of Jesus Christ were mere fiction? Would the zeal of Christians around the world continue unabated in such a case? That seems highly unlikely. Are liberal Christian denominations prospering? It will not, I hope, be considered uncharitable for me to observe that the contrasting historical and demographic trajectories of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its much more liberal “Reorganized” cousin, currently called the Community of Christ, strongly suggest that abandoning literal belief on core matters makes a palpable difference.

Launius quotes Anthony Hutchinson, who has since left the church and, it seems, abandoned the Book of Mormon, as advising that “Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints should confess in faith that the Book of Mormon is the word of God but also abandon claims that it is a historical record of the ancient peoples of the Americas.”⁶² “I agree,” says Launius,

and I must confess that I fail to understand what all the fuss is about. I would agree with the conclusion of non-Mormon William P. Collins that “When I examine the Book of Mormon for truth rather than facticity, my reading reveals powerful, eternal, and relevant truths which are capable of changing and guiding men’s lives.”⁶³

This is all well and good, of course. I’m happy that William Collins perceives something of the power of the Book of Mormon, which I strongly agree is there in abundance. But some truths derive all or most of their virtue from their facticity. If they lack a basis in factual

62. Launius, “Defending the Prophet,” 317–18; he is citing Anthony A. Hutchinson, “The Word of God Is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-Century Scripture,” in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 1. Of course, it isn’t clear that such a nineteenth-century understanding is enough: The once-Mormon Hutchinson is now an Episcopalian, and the volume’s editor, Brent Metcalfe, is an excommunicated agnostic/atheist.

63. Launius, “Defending the Prophet,” 318.

reality, they lose their force. Indeed, they disillusion. The significance of Christ's resurrection is vastly different when understood as a literal bodily return from death that opens the gate to eternal life, than when it is understood merely as a nonfactual symbol of the return of spring after winter, of hope following despair.

On 12 April 2006, thinking about the approaching May meeting of the Mormon History Association, at which Dan Vogel, Bill Russell, Gary Topping, and Martha Bradley were slated to comment on his book, Bushman expressed his curiosity about "the criticism this gang of four is likely to come up with."⁶⁴ He had reason to be concerned. Dan Vogel, whom Bushman has characterized as "perhaps Joseph's chief antagonist these days,"⁶⁵ typically maintains that he has no agenda except historical research. But, occasionally, he suffers an attack of candor. "When you debate with the apologists," he recently confided in a post to an anti-Mormon message board, "it's not them you have to convince—it's the disinterested or questioning lurkers. The apologists' goals are to create reasons to keep members from leaving the church, but our goal should be to keep people from joining and validate those who want to leave anyway."⁶⁶

As it turns out, I was there in Casper, Wyoming, for that session, and Bushman's concerns were entirely justified. Of the four respondents, only Martha Bradley manifested anything like a sympathetic understanding of his book. Dan Vogel was critical. Bill Russell regretted, in otherwise rather frivolous remarks, that Bushman had not devoted more time to careful study of the work of Grant Palmer.⁶⁷

64. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 113 (12 April 2006).

65. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 120 (31 May 2006).

66. See mormondiscussions.com/discuss/viewtopic.php?p=17205&highlight=goal#17205 (accessed 14 May 2007).

67. On which, see Bitton, "Charge of a Man with a Broken Lance"; Steven C. Harper, "Trustworthy History?"; Mark Ashurst-McGee, "A One-Sided View of Mormon Origins"; and Louis Midgley, "Prying into Palmer," *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 257–410; and James B. Allen, "Asked and Answered: A Response to Grant H. Palmer," *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 235–85. Recently, Bill Russell has been attempting to spin his way out of an amusing gaffe in which he plainly seemed to mischaracterize and criticize essays that had not only not yet appeared in the *FARMS Review* but had not even been written at the time he published his complaint. He launched his preemptive strike against FARMS in a glowing review of Dan Vogel's highly imaginative psychobiography *Joseph Smith: The*

Gary Topping was openly contemptuous of what Latter-day Saints believe about the historical foundations of their faith.⁶⁸

I could go on, but there seems to be little or nothing in the reception of Richard Bushman's *Rough Stone Rolling* to suggest that alienated exbelievers, let alone the academic/intellectual elite, are likely, now or in the foreseeable future, to give Latter-day Saint truth claims a respectful hearing. John-Charles Duffy's diagnosis appears to be correct. But then, it's not at all obvious that any knowledgeable and astute observers ever thought otherwise.

Inoculation

Writing in his journal about *Rough Stone Rolling*, Bushman remarks that "part of my purpose in writing is to introduce the troublesome material into the standard account to prevent horrible shocks later."⁶⁹

The real question is, Should we hide troublesome things from the Saints and hope they will never find out? The problem then is what happens when they do. They are disillusioned and in danger of mistrusting everything they have been told. . . . Amazingly, many LDS don't know Joseph married thirty women. We have to get these facts out to be dealt with; other-

Making of a Prophet, in *Dialogue* 38/3 (2005): 188–92. Kevin Barney called him on it in a letter, "Fairness to FARMS," that appeared in a subsequent issue of the same journal, *Dialogue* 39/2 (2006): vi–vii. Russell's not altogether persuasive explanation, still unrepentantly judgmental and negative, appears as a letter entitled "What Is FARMS Afraid Of?" in *Dialogue* 40/1 (2007): vii–ix. (Allegedly, we're afraid of publishing responses to our reviews. In support of this, Russell relates a substantially inaccurate story involving my friend Todd Compton.) Immediately following Russell's epistle, incidentally, is a superb response by Mark Ashurst-McGee to comments made previously by Dan Vogel about the visitations of Moroni.

68. Gary Topping's disdain for things Mormon is found throughout his *Utah Historians and the Reconstruction of Western History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), which is a thinly veiled apologia for Dale L. Morgan, Fawn M. Brodie, Bernard DeVoto, and Wallace Stegner in their roles as critics of the Saints and the Saints' history. For example, the final chapter of this book, entitled "The Legacy: Utah Historians and the 'New' Histories" (pages 331–40), is an essentially garbled account of developments in the study of the Mormon past that have taken place in the last half century.

69. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 82 (21 November 2005).

wise we are in a vulnerable position. It may be my job to bring the whole of Joseph's story into the open.⁷⁰

I keep hearing of young people who are shocked to discover the ideal Joseph Smith they learned about in Church is not the Joseph Smith most scholars perceive. Taken aback, the young Mormons not only wonder about the Prophet but about their teachers. Everything comes tumbling down.⁷¹

I worry about the young Latter-day Saints who learn only about the saintly Joseph and are shocked to discover his failings. The problem is that they may lose faith in the entire teaching system that brought them along. If their teachers covered up Joseph Smith's flaws, what else are they hiding?⁷²

I share Bushman's concerns and have reflected on this issue for a long time. I've repeatedly used the metaphor of inoculation to express what I have in mind. A friendly and well-intentioned healthcare professional injects a patient with a benign form of a disease under favorable circumstances so that, later on, when the patient encounters a more threatening form of the disease in more hostile environs, he or she will be immune to its ravages. It seems to me far preferable that Latter-day Saints hear about potentially difficult issues from fellow believers who have accommodated the facts into their faith than that they be confronted by such issues at the hands of people who seek to use new information to surprise them, undermine their confidence in the church and its leaders, and destroy their religious beliefs.

Many years ago, while a graduate student in California, I heard the late Stanley B. Kimball (a Latter-day Saint scholar who taught at Southern Illinois University and published extensively on both European and Latter-day Saint historical subjects) speak to a small group about what he termed "the three levels of Mormon history."

70. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 79 (14 November 2005). Some of Bushman's own reflections on the question of plural marriage appear on pages 97–98 (30 December 2005).

71. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 102 (8 January 2006).

72. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 121 (31 May 2006).

He called the first of these “level A.” This level, he said, is the Junior Sunday School version of church history, in which Mormons always wear the white hats, nobody disagrees, no leader ever makes a mistake, and all is unambiguously clear.

“Level B,” he said, is the anti-Mormon version of church history—essentially a mirror image of level A or, alternatively, level A turned on its head. On level B, everything that you thought was good and true is actually false and bad. The Mormons (or, at least, their leaders) always or almost always wear black hats, and, to the extent that everything is unambiguously clear, Mormonism is unambiguously fraudulent, bogus, deceptive, and evil. Much in the level B version of Mormonism is simply false, of course; critics of the church have often failed to distinguish themselves for their honesty or for the care with which they’ve treated the issues they raise. But, in more than a few instances, level B approaches to Mormonism and its past are based on problems that are more or less real.

The church, Kimball reflected, tends to teach level A history. The trouble with this is that, like someone who has been kept in a germ-free environment and is then exposed to an infectious disease, a person on level A who is exposed to any of the issues that are the fodder for level B will have little resistance and will be likely to fall.

The only hope in such a case, he continued, is to press on to what he termed “level C,” which is a version of church history that remains affirmative but which also takes into account any and all legitimate points stressed by level B. Those on level C are largely impervious to infection from level B. Level B formulations simply don’t impress them. (Davis Bitton was a signal example of this. He knew far more about the Latter-day Saint past than the Internet critics who so glibly assert that Mormon testimonies cannot survive exposure to accurate Mormon history, yet he remained exuberantly faithful to the end.)

Kimball said that he and his fellow historians operate on level C, and that, on the whole, that’s where he (as a professional historian) would prefer members to be. He was deeply convinced, he said, that level C was essentially like level A, except that it is more nuanced and somewhat more ambiguous. (He emphatically denied that level A is

“false,” or that the church “lies” in teaching it.) He acknowledged, though, that, were he himself a high-ranking church leader, he would be hesitant to take the membership as a whole to level C by means of church curriculum and instruction for the obvious reason that moving people from level A to level C entails at least some exposure to some of the elements of level B and that such exposure will unavoidably lead some to lose their testimonies. Still, he felt that those who make it through to level C are more stable and resilient in their faith than those who remain on level A.

Stanley Kimball’s analysis strikes me as profoundly true.⁷³ Some have objected to *Rough Stone Rolling* on the grounds that, by presenting Joseph Smith as a fallible human, Bushman has provided material that critics of the church can use to argue against Joseph’s prophetic claims. “The problem with the fuel-for-enemies objection,” Bushman correctly observes, “is that the fuel is already there. I don’t provide it. We have to deal with it or it will be used against us.”⁷⁴

There is no basis for the belief, common among some anti- and ex-Mormons, that simple exposure to “the facts” about Mormon history mandates an exit from Mormonism. Everything hangs on selection and presentation, as well as on overall presuppositions. I note, for the record, that, so far as I can tell, the large majority of professionally trained Mormon historians who deal with church history are believing and committed Latter-day Saints. I know (or have known) many of them. “After all these years of studying Joseph’s life,” says Richard Bushman, “I believe more than ever.”⁷⁵ In fact, Bushman’s faith and his earnest commitment to Christian discipleship are apparent throughout his memoir. “I like what Mormonism has produced,” he writes.

Mormon communities effectively help people to grow spiritually and serve one another. Because of their beliefs, Mormons give selflessly for a cause higher than themselves. Though far

73. I thought it a wise and perceptive talk, even though, had I myself given it, I would have spoken in Hegelian terms (of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis) rather than in terms of levels A, B, and C.

74. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 100 (8 January 2006).

75. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 111 (16 March 2006).

from perfect, Mormons do strive hard to be unselfish and to be better people. That seems to me to be confirmation of the value and religious truth of the founding experiences.⁷⁶

In my case believing in them helps me to make sense of the world and to be a better person. It is like Jesus said in the New Testament: If you live his commandments you will know if they be of God or if he spoke of himself. Living inside Mormonism, it all makes sense.⁷⁷

I might add that what seems outlandish from the outside can appear quite rational from the inside. Mormon scholars have assembled lots of evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.⁷⁸

Bushman told an 18 April 2006 audience at the Lehman Center at Columbia University that “I did not think Joseph Smith was capable of writing the Book of Mormon—the book was too complex—and that how it came about remains a mystery.” Thinking about the meeting afterwards, though, he wished he had been “more forthright.” Among other things, he felt that he should have said “I think Joseph Smith was a truth-teller. Angels do not seem like an impossibility to me—nor gold plates. But what attracts me most strongly is the inspiration I find in the text itself.”⁷⁹

In a 9 August 2005 note to Quincy Newell, a teacher of religious studies at the University of Wyoming, Bushman implicitly addresses the frequent boast of certain evangelicals that their beliefs are based in reason and evidence, while Latter-day Saint faith rests merely on subjective and irrational “feelings.”

I wish I could strike a responsive chord in Christians like you. Mormons wonder why all Christians don't under-

76. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 88 (15 December 2005).

77. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 91–92 (17 December 2005).

78. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 88 (15 December 2005).

79. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 114–15 (18 April 2006). His own conversion, as a young missionary, by the Book of Mormon is recounted at Richard Lyman Bushman, “My Belief,” in Bushman, *Believing History*, 20–22.

stand that we believe in the Book of Mormon on the basis of a spiritual witness. It is very hard for a Mormon to believe that Christians accept the Bible because of the scholarly evidence confirming the historical accuracy of the work. Surely there are uneducated believers whose convictions are not rooted in academic knowledge. Isn't there some kind of human, existential truth that resonates with one's desires for goodness and divinity? And isn't that ultimately why we read the Bible as a devotional work? We don't have to read the latest issues of the journals to find out if the book is still true. We stick with it because we find God in its pages—or inspiration, or comfort, or scope. That is what religion is about in my opinion, and it is why I believe the Book of Mormon. I can't really evaluate all the scholarship all the time; while I am waiting for it to settle out, I have to go on living. I need some good to hold on to and to lift me up day by day. The Book of Mormon inspires me, and so I hold on. Reason is too frail to base a life on. You can be whipped about by all the authorities with no genuine basis for deciding for yourself. I think it is far better to go where goodness lies.

. . . Educated Christians claim to base their belief on reason when I thought faith was the teaching of the scriptures. You hear the Good Shepherd's voice, and you follow it.⁸⁰

Still, Bushman confides to his journal his fear that perhaps he has been too subtle in making his own faithful position clear to readers of *Rough Stone Rolling*. Preparing, on 14 September 2005, for a talk at the Princeton Club in New York City, he confesses that "I have a tendency to be too diffident and overly modest. Claudia [his wife] hates that. I intend to confront the gold plates problem head on, the foundation for thinking of Joseph Smith as a fraud."⁸¹ On 19 April 2006, still reflecting on the Lehman Center discussion of the previous day, he asks himself:

80. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 15–16 (9 August 2005).

81. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 27 (14 September 2005).

Am I afraid to come down unequivocally for fear of cutting myself completely out of the academic discussion, like a Jew covering up his Jewishness or a pale African American trying to pass? I say to myself that I confess my belief on the opening page, and from there on I am simply trying to make room for a non-believer. Long ago I said on a radio interview that Fawn Brodie cuts Mormons out of her book. There was no room for believers among her readers unless they accepted the status of idiots and dupes. I didn't want to leave non-Mormons out of my account, so I tried to address them and say, I understand your needs. Do I go so far in this direction in *RSR* that I play pitty-pat? In my effort to make the Book of Mormon intelligible do I fail to convey my own conviction that it is true? And the same for the revelations and for Joseph Smith's divine calling.

Somehow I felt like I was playing pitty-pat yesterday at the Lehman Center. I fell somewhere short of complete unequivocality in my answers. I have thought of many better answers since. Perhaps the best is the simplest: "Yes, I believe the Book of Mormon is true. I am a Mormon; that is what Mormons do." Or on another tack: "Yes, I believe Joseph Smith's story. I don't think he was a fraud." Or: "Yes, I believe the Book of Mormon is true. That is why I want it to be treated with more respect. Whether you believe it or not, the book is a marvelous creation." These answers retreat into the personal like most testimonies. They don't assert that everyone must accept my truth; they call it my truth, implying you can have your truth. I am simply presenting my point of view; take it or leave it. The advantage of listening to my point of view is that you can come to understand what it was like to be a Mormon or to be Joseph Smith.⁸²

Eventually, Bushman begins to think that maybe he should have been forthrightly and explicitly Mormon in *Rough Stone Rolling* itself.

82. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 115–16 (19 April 2006).

I can see now that I could have written the whole book inside this framework. Instead of trying to keep the reader and myself in the same place, creating a common point of view amenable to believer and non-believer alike, I could have taken on the role of guide to a Mormon perspective on the Mormon prophet, acknowledging the differences and saying this is how we look at it. The point of persuasion would be to show the benefits of examining Joseph from a believer's perspective. What can you learn by looking at him through believing eyes that might be lost if you begin with the assumption he had to be a fraud. It would not take many changes to rewrite the book in that way. A few alterations in the introduction, a few others at key points would do the job. At these junctures, I would step forward and say, This is where a Mormon and non-Mormon historian will part company. Here is what you can learn if you will follow me. Once again, candor is the best policy. Why didn't I see that earlier? Live and learn.⁸³

Nonetheless, he has high hopes for the long-term impact of *Rough Stone Rolling* and similar ventures in frank and forthright Mormon historiography:

The overall effect will be to move the Church toward greater candor, even though I suffer in the mean time. I am concerned about the discrepancy between the idealized Joseph in Institute classes and the criticized Joseph in secular and hostile sources. Young Latter-day Saints are left to reconcile these two without help from their teachers. Simply denying the validity of the criticism is not enough when facts are involved. Some will shut their minds to the criticism; but others will become disillusioned, not just with the Prophet but with the entire teaching apparatus. They will feel they have been misled. My book may encourage a dialogue about candor within CES. The instructors will ask each other what is

83. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 116–17 (19 April 2006).

lost and gained by telling the full story. Gradually the center of opinion will move toward openness.⁸⁴

Very much in the spirit of Stanley Kimball's California remarks, Bushman predicts that "People will mull over the facts about Joseph and eventually accommodate even the tough parts. In the end we will be more stable for having assimilated all this material."⁸⁵ Another worry also occupied Bushman's mind occasionally: "Whether or not they agree with the book, the General Authorities don't like someone like me taking control of interpretation. They objected to FARMS on those grounds after they seemed to be monopolizing Book of Mormon interpretation."⁸⁶

Candidly, I'm not sure that I know what he has in mind with this comment. The Brethren have never, to my knowledge, come down on FARMS in the way he suggests, and I know from personal conversation with a number of them that at least some of the General Authorities appreciate the work done by FARMS. In particular, it seems to me quite clear that the permission given by the Brethren to rename the overall organization in which FARMS rests "The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship" constitutes a vote of confidence, not a rebuke.

In This Issue

A vocally obsessive critic of mine (and of all things Mormon) recently declared on an anti-Mormon message board that "there really aren't any 'effective' defenses of the Church which do not entail ad hominem attack. That is why FARMS Review is so rank with ad hominem attack that DCP feels compelled to post self-deprecating jokes about it."

84. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 100–101 (8 January 2006).

85. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 85 (2 December 2005).

86. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, 24 (8 September 2005). On page 105, Bushman writes that "There remains the problem of becoming a rival expert [to the General Authorities] in the interpretation of doctrine, but I can avoid that by not talking doctrine when asked to speak. My mind is aswirl with doctrinal ideas which do not need to be vented, especially when I acknowledge their speculative nature myself" (6 February 2006). Some of those ideas (which, I confess, resemble certain of my own speculations) appear on pages 60–61 (28 October 2005).

He was being charitable. As another message board poster put it, the *FARMS Review*

is in truth the food of death, the fuel of sin, the veil of malice, the pretext of false liberty, the protection of disobedience, the corruption of discipline, the depravity of morals, the termination of Concord, the death of honesty, the well-spring of vices, the disease of virtues, the instigation of rebellion, the milk of pride, the nourishment of contempt, the death of peace, the destruction of charity, the enemy of unity, the murderer of truth.

No. Wait a minute. Scratch that. It wasn't a message board poster. It was Johannes Cochlaeus (d. 1552), an opponent of the Reformation who interfered with the publication of William Tyndale's translation of the New Testament. And he wasn't talking about the *FARMS Review*. He was denouncing "the New Testament translated into the vulgar tongue [i.e., English]."⁸⁷

Anyway, readers of this number of the *Review* will, yet again, be able to judge for themselves whether (as a number of vocal critics routinely say) it consists largely of vituperation and name-calling.

James Allen (Lemuel H. Redd Professor of Western History emeritus at Brigham Young University and former assistant church historian of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) and John Sorenson (retired BYU professor of anthropology) offer tributes to their friend Davis Bitton.⁸⁸

Brant Gardner critiques an attempt to correlate the Book of Mormon with ancient Mesoamerica, while psychologist Richard Williams responds to yet another reductionist theory of its origin. William Hamblin demonstrates that "reformed Egyptian" and the writing of sacred texts on metal plates fit very comfortably into the ancient milieu that the Book of Mormon claims as its own cultural background.

87. John S. Kerr and Charles Houser, *Ancient Texts Alive Today* (New York: American Bible Society, 1999), 45. I thank Alison V. P. Coutts for bringing this remarkable passage to my attention.

88. They are, incidentally, members of the Gadianton Polysophical Marching and Chowder Society, mentioned above.

Louis Midgley reflects on Richard Bushman's important biography *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, a landmark in Mormon-related publishing, and M. Gerald Bradford considers the current state and future prospects of Mormon-focused scholarship. Terryl Givens surveys the challenge that new religious movements like Mormonism pose to mainstream religion, and James Faulconer offers a specific example of that challenge with his critique of conventional approaches to theology. So, too, does Alyson Von Feldt's essay on the question of whether God has a wife—a question to which Latter-day Saints emphatically answer Yes—which dovetails nicely with the exchange between evangelical biblical scholar Michael Heiser and Latter-day Saint doctoral student David Bokovoy on the subject of the “divine council” among the ancient Hebrews. The Heiser-Bokovoy exchange, incidentally, provides a wonderful model of civil, respectful, and informed discussion between evangelicals and Latter-day Saints, a model with far too few analogues elsewhere. I'm grateful to both authors for their scholarship and for their exemplary manner of expressing it.

Jacob Rawlins and Alison Coutts examine four recent Latter-day Saint treatments of the apostasy of the ancient Christian church. Stephen Ricks examines a unique perspective on the book of Daniel, and John Gee critiques a study of the facsimiles in the Book of Abraham. Ralph Hancock contemplates the decline of secular higher education, a relatively recent experiment that, for various reasons, many have mistakenly come to regard as the only legitimate paradigm for modern universities. And, finally, a series of book notes briefly treats recent publications of which we want our readers to be aware.

Just as we were going to press with this issue of the *FARMS Review*, we learned of the recent passing of Robert R. Bennett, who reviewed Duwayne R. Anderson's *Farewell to Eden: Coming to Terms with Mormonism and Science* in the *FARMS Review* 18/2 (2006): 1–43. We regret his passing and extend our condolences and best wishes to his family and friends. We are pleased to have provided him with a venue in which he could express his faith.

Editor's Picks

For several years now, we have offered in each number of the *Review* a list of recommended items, compiled through a complex and rigorous process of asking ourselves what we think and then choosing more or less whimsically between conflicting opinions. As I've said before, the fact that a book appears in this list is more significant than the rather arbitrary number of asterisks it receives, which could easily have been different. Since nobody has ordered us not to offer such recommendations, we're going to do it again. (Stop us before we pick again!)

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

Here are the recommendations from this number of the *Review*:

- **** Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*
- *** Alexander B. Morrison, *Turning from Truth: A New Look at the Great Apostasy*
- *** Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*
- ** Tad R. Callister, *The Inevitable Apostasy and the Promised Restoration*
- ** William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*
- ** Scott R. Petersen, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?*
- * C. John Sommerville, *The Decline of the Secular University*

Although the official editor's picks does not include selections from those works presented in the book notes, I would like to call favorable attention to Margaret Barker's *The Hidden Tradition of the Kingdom of God*, Alan Jacobs's *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis*, Ramsay MacMullen's *Voting about God in Early Church Councils*, Peter McEnhill and George Newlands's *Fifty Key Christian Thinkers*, and Christian Smith's *Soul Searching: The Religious and*

Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers. And, well, um, my *Muhammad* biography may not be the worst book ever published, either.

Acknowledgments

Sadly, the tenure of Shirley Ricks as production editor of the *FARMS Review*—nineteen years' worth—comes to a close with this number. For essentially twenty years, she has been the person who organized it, kept it moving along, and saw it through to completion. (She missed one issue when she and her family were overseas.) She has worked wonders. Consistently. She has always been dependable. We have relied on her solid good judgment. Now she takes those qualities into her assignment to finish the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley in time for the centennial of his 1910 birth. It's a very worthy project, but her departure is, at best, bittersweet. I'm grateful to her for her work not only on this number but for an amazing thirty previous issues.

I'm also grateful to the two associate editors of the *Review*, Louis Midgley and George Mitton, whose counsel, insight, and sheer hard work are indispensable. Paula Hicken orchestrates source checking and proofreading tasks, doing much of it herself; she was assisted in these tasks by Julie Adams, Brette Jones, Linda Sheffield, and Sandra Thorne. I also greatly appreciate the fine work Jacob Rawlins does in typesetting the *FARMS Review* and the support from Alison Coutts and others in the administration of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute of Religious Scholarship.

Finally, as always, I want to thank those who have written for us. Besides a free copy of the *Review* and, where applicable, a copy of a book that they may not even like, our writers receive nothing *but* thanks. (Persistent claims by our critics that Mormon apologetics pays well are no better founded in actual reality than most of the rest of their assertions.) Without our writers, though, there would obviously be no *FARMS Review*.