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Abstract Peterson explains that disbelief in the religious does not leave a person who believes in nothing; it leaves a person who is willing to believe in anything except God. Peterson also mentions that from an academic standpoint he cannot explain the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in any way other than that which is presented by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Editor's Introduction

Where Ideas Won't Face Serious Challenge

Daniel C. Peterson

For a long time, many Latter-day Saint academics and intellectuals have sought to bring Mormon studies into the academic mainstream, and recently their efforts have begun to bear some fruit. A number of schools in the United States and even beyond now include courses on Mormonism in their curriculum. Some—including Utah State University and California's Claremont Graduate University—have established endowed professorships in Mormon studies. The Anglican theologian and anthropologist Douglas Davies, author (among many other things) of *The Mormon Culture of Salvation: Force, Grace and Glory*[1] and *An Introduction to Mormonism*,[w] directs studies of Mormonism at Durham University, in the United Kingdom. The prolific Latter-day Saint scholar Terryl Givens, of the University of Richmond in Virginia, has published extensively and brilliantly with Oxford University Press (and elsewhere) on the Book of Mormon, Latter-day Saint intellectual history, the Mormon image in literature, and similar topics. The unique Mormon interest in ancient temples has recently reached international audiences with William Hamblin and David Seely's *Solomon's Temple: Myth and History*[2] and John Lundquist's *The Temple of Jerusalem: Past, Present, and Future*[3]—both

1. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000.
2. London: Thames and Hudson, 2007.
3. Westport, CN: Praeger, 2008.

of which, significantly, are dedicated to the memory of Hugh Nibley, the father of temple studies among Latter-day Saints. A program unit entitled "Latter-day Saints and the Bible" exists within the national Society of Biblical Literature, as does a "Mormon Studies Consultation" within the American Academy of Religion, and the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology sponsors a recurring session at the Academy's annual national meeting. Conferences relating to Mormon studies have been held over the past few years at such elite institutions as Yale Divinity School, Claremont Graduate University, Princeton University, and Harvard Law School.

Among other things, such developments undoubtedly reflect considerable confidence on the part of their Latter-day Saint participants that both Mormons and Mormonism are capable of holding their own in the academic "big leagues," of moving beyond the comfort zone of the so-called Mormon corridor along the Wasatch Front and even of making a contribution to the relevant broader fields.

But there is another way of looking at the unfolding situation.

"Apologists," one anonymous critic of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints opined on an Internet message board in mid-March 2009, "opt to hold their conferences in high-LDS-density places like Claremont or New England, where their ideas won't possibly face any significant challenges."

Now, I confess that, when I read that sentence, I laughed aloud. And then I laughed again. And then I included it as a signature on my e-mails. The notion that Mormons would choose Harvard and Yale and Princeton and Claremont because, as compared to other places (including the Mormon corridor itself!), those schools are complacently uncritical and Mormon-friendly is, simply, too ridiculous to require refutation. (Its author was certainly daring, though, to have advanced his claim anonymously, on an obscure message board whose posters are overwhelmingly hostile to Mormonism and utterly enraptured by virtually anything that denigrates the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.) But the comment does demonstrate that, no matter how silly a position may be, someone, somewhere, will hold it and advocate it. And, most probably, online. (We've long been

assured that a million monkeys banging away on a million typewriters would eventually reproduce the entire works of Shakespeare. Now, though, thanks to the Internet, we know that this claim is false.) And no matter how obviously true a proposition may be, there will still be somebody, somewhere, who will reject it. "It's impossible to make anything foolproof," goes the anonymous saying, "because fools are so ingenious."

The fact is that humans can and will believe and disbelieve anything at all. And this is by no means limited only to religious people.

Recently, the English-speaking world, at least, has been subjected to an aggressively vocal phenomenon sometimes called "The New Atheism," which not only blames virtually every evil in human history on theism but paints theists as dangerous irrationalists. "You can't be a rational person six days of the week," declared the alleged comedian Bill Maher during a 2008 appearance on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, "and put on a suit and make rational decisions and go to work and, on one day of the week, go to a building and think you're drinking the blood of a 2,000-year-old space god."[4]

In fact, though, some studies indicate not only that superstition and irrationality aren't limited to the religious, but that the more theologically liberal or secular a person is, the more likely he or she is to believe in occult and paranormal phenomena.[5] A famous statement probably misattributed to G. K. Chesterton comes immediately to mind in this context: When a person stops believing in God, Chesterton is supposed to have remarked, that person doesn't then believe in nothing; he believes in *anything*.

I offer, as an example of this phenomenon, an exchange that I came across recently on a deeply negative apostate message board.

4. Cited by Mollie Ziegler Hemingway, "Look Who's Irrational Now," *The Wall Street Journal* (19 September 2008), http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122178219865054585.html (accessed 29 July 2009).

5. As summarized in Hemingway, "Look Who's Irrational Now." As I write, I'm also reading a book by the Oxford mathematician and philosopher of science John Lennox, entitled *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion, 2007), which makes a very rational case for the truth and continued relevance of theism. The book originated in a series of lectures presented at the universities of Oxford and Salzburg (Austria).

One poster, formerly a believing member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, suggested that the Book of Mormon could be accounted for if we "throw in a few instances where [Joseph Smith] memorized lengthy passages, and add a little extra imagination from his followers and maybe a magic prop, and I think we'd have the miracle explained."

In response, a disaffected member of what is now termed the Community of Christ—formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints—who now strenuously advocates the Spalding/Rigdon theory of Book of Mormon authorship, turned in what I regard as a genuinely bravura performance, explaining the experience of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon:

> A little belladonna slipped into your drink, and the pupils of your eyes open up so wide that ordinary daylight is brighter than the sun—and especially so, if your eyes have been closed for half an hour "in prayer" while waiting for the surreptitiously administered drug to take effect.
>
> A megaphone, used by an accomplice hidden in the bushes, could have a truly wonderful effect upon a person dosed up with "deadly nightshade."
>
> A few worn-out copper engraving plates, cut to size and spiffed up with brass polish, would be convincing "gold" to a guy (unknowingly) on jimsonweed.
>
> A pair of joined magnifying glasses, with handles removed, would look mighty strange to an uninformed person under the effects of mushrooms.
>
> A sword, a discarded lake steamer's compass, and some phosphorus judiciously applied to objects in the shade of trees would be dazzling.
>
> Add an immaculate white robe, a tablecloth, a folding table, and a practiced, deep, preacher's voice emulating God Almighty—and you might be able to fool old Tom Paine himself.

One can scarcely fail to remember the critique of Fawn Brodie, an occasionally very inventive biographer of Joseph Smith, leveled by the late David Herbert Donald (he passed away earlier this year), who was at the time Charles Warren Professor of American History at Harvard. "Such absence of evidence would stop most historians," he wrote about one portion of her biography of Thomas Jefferson,

> but it does not faze Mrs. Brodie. Where there are documents, she knows how to read them in a special way. . . . Where documents have been lost, Mrs. Brodie can make much of the gap. . . . Mrs. Brodie is masterful in using negative evidence too. . . . But Mrs. Brodie is at her best when there is no evidence whatever to cloud her vision. Then she is free to speculate.[6]

Now, I don't know that either of the folks involved in this wild little speculation-fest about the Book of Mormon is actually an atheist. Perhaps not. But, with regard to the founding events of Mormonism, both have, practically speaking, chosen to exclude God. Which reminds me of something that G. K. Chesterton indisputably did write, using his remarkable fictional detective, Father Brown, as voice: "It's the first effect of not believing in God that you lose your common sense, and can't see things as they are."[7] It also reminds me of a passage from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle that I sometimes fear I've flogged nearly to death but that continues to be astonishingly relevant to the passing scene: "When you have eliminated the impossible," Sherlock Holmes explained to Dr. Watson, "whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth."[8]

For these two critics of Mormonism, divine involvement in the origins of the Book of Mormon is, effectively, impossible, ruled out

6. David Herbert Donald, "By Sex Obsessed," review of *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, by Fawn M. Brodie, *Commentary* 58/1 (July 1974): 97–98.

7. G. K. Chesterton, "The Oracle of the Dog," in *The Incredulity of Father Brown* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1926), 95. On the zombie-like Spalding/Ridgon theory, see Matthew Roper, "The Mythical 'Manuscript Found,'" *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 7–140.

8. Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Sign of Four," in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1930), 111, emphasis in the original.

by their current stance toward the prophetic claims of Joseph Smith. So they're willing to accept extraordinarily improbable just-so stories, in the absence of any even marginally serious supporting evidence, rather than to entertain the explanation that believing Latter-day Saints accept. Since they can't believe in *nothing*, they're willing, from my point of view, to believe in *anything*. As the late Utah historian Dale Morgan notoriously put it in a 1945 letter to the believing Latter-day Saint historian Juanita Brooks,

> 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.[9]

And once Joseph Smith's own account of the recovery of the Book of Mormon is rejected, the sky's the limit. Virtually any tall tale can be (and, in my experience, will be) swallowed rather than accepting the truth. Here, taken just today from the same embarrassingly fertile message board, is yet another explanation of the witnesses and of their fidelity to their testimonies (which poses a serious problem for honest critics of Mormonism). It seems that, in testifying to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon even when they were at death's door, they were really just acknowledging their guilt in perpetrating fraud!

> I think that events of the lives of those men are found within the pages of the book: Mormon 1:1 for example, and the story in 1 Nephi, relating to Joseph's life. Others have raised this possibility and I've followed it to some interesting conclusions.
>
> If the book reflects the lives of those men, then Helaman chapter 9 becomes very interesting in light of extorting someone, binding them to an agreement.

9. Dale Morgan to Juanita Brooks, 15 December 1945, at Arlington, Virginia. Transcribed in John Phillip Walker, ed., *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 87.

> The remarkable thing is, by saying it is all true, the culprits are forced to confess the deeds they have committed, though they are given an out—Joseph provides them with a way to protect themselves by putting the story in an ancient setting.
>
> In this way, even the deathbed professions are interesting, especially Cowdery's. He "knew" it was true, and of course he would know such a thing, experientially.

There is undeniable ingenuity in this sort of thing, as there *always* is in sophistry. It's not easy to persuade normal people that white is black, that day is night, and that up is down. "Wow," came the first, admiring response from another poster. And I echo it: Wow.

A small but significant portion of my secular, intellectual testimony of the Book of Mormon rests on the fact that I just can't swallow such stories. I simply can't muster the faith. I have, I think, made a serious effort to construct, in my own mind, a coherent counter-explanation of the Book of Mormon that would account for the data as well as, in my opinion, the version taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does. But I'm unable to do it. Too many lethal anomalies remain. Too many of the known facts are left unaccounted for. This or that theory or hypothesis may offer a more or less plausible alternative account of a given portion of the relevant data, but never, in my judgment, of anywhere near enough. I'm convinced of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon (and, derivatively, of the reliability of the claims of Joseph Smith and the restoration) partly because no alternative account of the formative events of Mormonism strikes me as adequate or comprehensively plausible. In a sense, I'm in the same boat as the ancient apostles of Jesus were:

> From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God. (John 6:66–69)

Much like Simon Peter, I'm convinced to my very core that "the words of eternal life" are with the restored Church of Jesus Christ. But I'm also convinced, on a much less spiritually exalted level, that the only satisfying historical account of the origins of Mormonism and of the rediscovery of the Book of Mormon is here, with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This is a claim that can be examined (though probably not definitively proven or disproven in this life), and we invite the examination. We ask only that it be fair-minded. A remark commonly attributed to the British philosopher Herbert Spencer—the attribution is mistaken, but the sentiment is sound—warns us that "there is a principle which is a bar against all information, which is proof against all arguments and which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance—that principle is contempt prior to investigation."[10]

In Memoriam: Truman G. Madsen

Another pillar of my faith is the sheer intellectual exhilaration that I've experienced in connection with Mormonism. I believe I first felt this exhilaration when a family in my ward persuaded me to attend a series of regional "Education Week" lectures at a chapel in West Covina, California, sometime in the late 1960s. One of the speakers was Truman G. Madsen, from Brigham Young University. Three or four nights in a row, he packed a large church cultural hall with lectures on very unlikely subjects—I recall "Existentialism" and "Logical Positivism" as two of the titles—and, for me, my encounter with him was a pivotal intellectual and spiritual event.

Truman Madsen showed me what I had not previously suspected—that there are very deep concepts in Mormonism that are worth a lifetime of exploring, that the gospel holds profound answers

10. I first encountered the quotation at http://americantestament.blogspot.com/2008/12/daniel-c-peterson-on-dna-and-book-of.html (accessed 29 July 2009). For an investigation of its source, see "Attributions to Spencer" at http://www.geocities.com/fitquotation/index.htm (accessed 29 July 2009).

to serious questions, and that thinking about such things is not only exciting but a satisfying spiritual path to pursue.

Over the subsequent years, Truman became, first, a teacher and then a colleague and a friend. And when he died on 28 May 2009 after a struggle with cancer, and several of us on the faculty at Brigham Young University fell spontaneously to talking about him and about what he had meant to us, and others began to post reminiscences of his counsel and his kindness, I found that I was far from the only one who had been profoundly influenced by his teaching, his life, and his writing. Because of him, I began to subscribe to *BYU Studies* in my teens, developing a still-lively fascination with Mormon studies. And it was very possibly because of him (and Hugh Nibley) that I decided to attend Brigham Young University—the effects of which, on my life, have been incalculable.

In This Issue

This number of the *FARMS Review* continues to provide the stimulating, insightful writing that its aficionados—"our reader," as we affectionately call them—have come to expect (and that our more fevered critics continue to despise and dread).

Kevin L. Barney, a practicing attorney in Illinois with a degree in ancient languages who has himself contributed significantly to Mormon studies, carefully examines John W. Welch's *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* and pronounces it "a seminal work." Duane Boyce reflects on the law of consecration and questions whether a particular contemporary political ideology can truly be seen as its modern, secular equivalent or demand our loyalty as Latter-day Saints. Donald L. Enders and Jennifer L. Lund review a faith-promoting account of the first printing of the Book of Mormon but come away unpersuaded. Latter-day Saint philosopher James E. Faulconer, however, is very impressed by Brant A. Gardner's six-volume *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*.

Brant Gardner himself appears in the pages of the *Review* with an essay entitled "Mormon's Editorial Method and Meta-Message." The distinguished Latter-day Saint scholar Terryl L. Givens also contributes

an essay, from his forthcoming Oxford University Press volume *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*. Alan Goff, too, weighs in with a characteristically insightful and thought-provoking piece entitled "How Should We Then Read? Reading Mormon Scripture after the Fall," which points to the inadequacies of the approach taken to the Book of Mormon by such reductionist critics as Dan Vogel. Anthropologist Steven L. Olsen offers a "literary approach" to the account of the death of Laban in 1 Nephi. Another valuable essay, entitled "We Might Know What to Do and How to Do It: On the Usefulness of the Religious Past," comes from Martin E. Marty, the eminent University of Chicago historian of American religion. And associate *Review* editor Louis Midgley considers the subject of "The Book of Mormon as Record" in a short essay that introduces the *Review*'s other pieces on the ancient Nephite text. In separate articles briefly introduced by *Review* associate editor George Mitton, Frederick M. Huchel and John W. Welch respond warmly to British Methodist scholar Margaret Barker's *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*.

Editor's Picks

And now, yet again, I list some of the items treated in the present number of the *FARMS Review* and append some rather subjective ratings to them. These ratings were determined in consultation with the two associate editors and the production editor of the *Review* and on the basis of the reviewers' comments, but the final responsibility for them is mine. Reviewed items that fail to appear in this list were omitted because we decided that we could not recommend them.

This is the scale that we use in our rating system:

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

As always, the fact that we recommend these books at all is more important than the specific rating we give to them. Things might have been slightly different on a different day, or after a different lunch.

But I'm delighted to report that, for the first time in the history of the *FARMS Review*, we've settled on our rare top rating for *all* of them:

**** Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*

**** John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon*

**** Margaret Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*

These are genuinely important books.

As always, I would like to thank those who have written reviews and essays for us. I trust that their reward is laid up in heaven. Otherwise, they get a free copy of this *Review* and, if they responded to a book, a copy of the book they reviewed—whether they liked it or not. I'm also grateful to Louis Midgley and George Mitton, the two associate editors of the *FARMS Review*, and to Don Brugger, its production editor, who does the day-to-day work and is actually responsible for making sure that the thing eventually appears, tangibly, in the real world. Finally, I express my thanks to Alison Coutts for assisting with various stages of the production process, to Jacob Rawlins for typesetting, to Paula Hicken for securing permissions, and to editing intern Charlotte Wood and her successor, Sara Seamons, for source checking, copyediting, and proofreading.