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Abstract Review of *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Quick Christian Guide to the Mormon Holy Book* (2009), by Ross Anderson.

UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF MORMON? HE “DOTH PROTEST TOO MUCH, METHINKS”

Ben McGuire

Review of Ross Anderson. *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Quick Christian Guide to the Mormon Holy Book*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009. 176 pp., incl. subject and scripture indexes. \$14.99.

Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth:
And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses and with assays of bias,
By indirections find directions out:
So by my former lecture and advice,
Shall you my son. You have me, have you not?¹

Imagine picking up a book with the title *Understanding Hamlet*.² After reading through a basic synopsis, some biographical information on Shakespeare, and perhaps some chronological details explaining the historical context of the drama, you come across a section with the heading “Should I Read *Hamlet*?” And what does it say? “I don’t see any harm in reading [*Hamlet*]. . . . It will be time-consuming. You

1. Polonius, in William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 2, scene 1.

2. There are, in fact, several books that have been published with this title or similar titles, for example, Peter Winders, *Understanding “Hamlet”* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1975); Timothy John Kelly, *Understanding Shakespeare: Hamlet* (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1964); Don Nardo, *Understanding Hamlet* (San Diego: Lucent, 2000); and Richard Corum, *Understanding Hamlet: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998).

may find parts of it boring or confusing. But reading the [play] is a good way to engage your friend in conversation” (p. 92).

In his preface, Ross Anderson shares with us his objective for his small book. It was “written both to explain and to evaluate the Book of Mormon from the perspective of the historic Christian faith” (p. 7). This is a rather curious way to start a book whose title suggests “understanding.” In reviewing this book, I have four objectives in mind: First, I want to discuss the notion of a “historic Christian faith,” what it means and how it is used in a comparative study like this one. Second, I want to explore the polemical nature of Anderson’s book within this context of comparative religious studies. Third, I want to take a closer look at Anderson’s notion of “understanding the Book of Mormon.” Finally, I want to examine a couple of specific apologetic arguments raised by Anderson against Mormonism.

The Historic Christian Faith, the Early Church, or Simple, Primitive Christianity?

The phrase “the historic Christian faith” is not all that uncommon, particularly in evangelical literature. What does it mean? In his book *The Remnant Spirit*, Douglas Cowan discusses the use of this phrase by evangelicals. He tells us it is a “floating signifier” that is interpreted “within rigorous conceptual boundaries. That which transgresses those boundaries is, by definition, located outside the pale of that historic Christian faith.” He then explains that

the problem with this is that, as a signifier of anything other than that which is interpreted to support and maintain the conservative Protestant vision of Christianity, “the historic Christian faith” is simply an empty concept. Although it is often used this way, history is not an objective circumstance that can be abstracted and made to command fealty for purposes of ideological advancement. There is no one authoritative version of history that can indisputably separate the authentic from the inauthentic. Rather, in terms of its contribution to the social construction of reality, history is an intricate, often

murky and inconsistent complex of situations and forces, attitudes and choices, memories and anti-memories, all of which serve the interpretive agendas of those who deploy history as something demanding allegiance. And, in deploying something like “the historic Christian faith” as a binding signifier, reform and renewal movements almost consistently ignore the fact that there is no such thing as Christianity per se; there are instead, both geographically and across time, multiple, often competing, sometimes mutually incompatible Christianities. The historic Christian faith as it is understood, for example, by the Greek Orthodox monks at the monastery on Mount Athos (at which not even female farm animals are allowed) is considerably different than that embraced by fundamentalist congregations in the Ozark Mountains whose faith is actualized through handling poisonous snakes. Yet, neither would deny they inhabit the historic Christian faith, although they may deny such inhabitance to the other.³

Anderson invokes the notion of a historic Christian belief several times,⁴ with the intent to claim that position for himself and to exclude the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from this inhabitance. He gives us perhaps an even better indication of the point he wishes to make when he writes of his desire to avoid referring to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by its preferred abbreviated form: the Church of Jesus Christ. “Yet in my mind, this implies an exclusive status that I cannot grant” (p. 8). Actually, it is not merely an exclusive status that Anderson denies; it is the position that the LDS faith might somehow be a part of that “historic Christian faith.”

Illustrating Cowan’s point, Joseph Smith also made this claim, although he used language that was much more at home in restoration movements in the early nineteenth century. We find this language for example, in the Articles of Faith, written by Joseph Smith in 1842

3. Douglas E. Cowan, *The Remnant Spirit: Conservative Reform in Mainline Protestantism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 166–67.

4. Examples include the following: “the historic Christian faith” (p. 7), “historic biblical Christianity” (pp. 47, 84), “the historic Christian position” (p. 50).

in a letter to John Wentworth, editor and proprietor of the *Chicago Democrat*. The sixth article reads: “We believe in the same organization that existed in the *Primitive Church*, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth.” This kind of language was popularized at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century by the influential Unitarian minister Joseph Priestley (although he certainly was not the only writer using this language). For these writers, the primitive church represented the simple, earliest Christianity that had been modified and corrupted and whose doctrines had been expanded from a range of heathen and Platonic sources. So, for example, in one of his letters to the Reverend James Barnard, Priestley tells us that the “primitive church” was not Trinitarian at all. Rather, he explains,

the doctrine of the *Trinity*, as it was first advanced, did not appear to infringe so much upon the doctrine of the *unity of God* as it did afterwards; and this infringement was absolutely disclaimed by those who held it. . . . This I prove from the great resemblance between their doctrine of the Trinity and the principles of Platonism; a resemblance pointed out, and even greatly magnified, by themselves; from their known attachment to the doctrines of *Plato*, and from their natural wish to avail themselves of the new idea they hereby got concerning the person of Christ, to make their religion appear to more advantage in the eyes of Heathen philosophers, and persons of distinction in their time.⁵

In 1988, Jonathan Smith gave a series of lectures discussing how the scholarship of comparative religions has largely been driven by Protestant-Catholic polemics. In this discussion, both sides laid claim to be a part of the tradition that best represented the early Christian faith, while accusing the other side of having departed from it. As Smith notes in his preface: “In what follows, I shall be reflecting on the comparative endeavor by means of a classic and privileged exam-

5. Quoted in John Rutt, ed., *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, LL.D. F.R.S. etc.* (London: G. Smallfield, 1790), 62–63.

ple: the comparison of early Christianities and the religions of Late Antiquity, especially the so-called mystery cults.”⁶ I bring this up because the discussion here is quite similar. Two faiths, each claiming to represent that early Christian faith (either as the primitive church or as the historic Christian faith), are being compared—and the result looks very similar to the past several hundred years of similar polemical arguments between competing faith traditions. Smith tells us, though, that “the entire enterprise of comparison . . . needs to be looked at again.”⁷

So what constitutes that historic Christian faith in Anderson’s perspective? He does not provide us with much, though he does give us four well-known points—the traditional doctrine of the Trinity and three of the five *solas*. First, Trinitarian doctrine: “Mormonism denies the traditional doctrine of the Trinity” (p. 42). Then *sola gratia*: “According to the Bible, a person is saved by God’s grace, through a response of turning from sin and trusting in the person and work of Jesus Christ” (p. 45). Then *sola scriptura*: “Historically, Christians have seen the Bible alone as God’s final, authoritative word to humanity” (p. 49). Finally *solus Christus*: “By contrast, the historic Christian position is that God’s conclusive revelation to humanity has already been given in the person of Jesus Christ, as elaborated in the Bible” (p. 50).

With the exception of Trinitarian dogma, Anderson’s discussion of these issues might well be taken whole cloth from a Protestant anti-Catholic tract. These core issues of the Reformation are tied tightly to the five points of Calvinism. It seems impossible, though, to determine to what extent Anderson believes in these five points. He is not as interested in the comparison set out in his preface as he is in pointing out that Mormonism does not meet his vision of the ideology of the historic Christian faith. However, the language that he has crafted provides us with some insight. For example, he provides a particularly evangelical interpretation of *sola scriptura* in this comment: “Historically, Christians have seen the Bible alone as God’s

6. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), vii.

7. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 143.

final, authoritative word to humanity” (p. 49). Keith Mathison describes this belief in this way:

The modern Evangelical [concept] of solo *scriptura* [as distinguished from *sola scriptura*] is nothing more than a new version of Tradition 0. Instead of being defined as the sole *infallible* authority, the Bible is said to be the “sole basis of authority.” Tradition is not allowed in any sense; the ecumenical creeds are virtually dismissed; and the Church is denied any real authority. On the surface it would seem that this modern Evangelical doctrine would have nothing in common with the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox doctrines of authority. But despite the very real differences, the modern Evangelical position shares one major flaw with both the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox positions. Each results in autonomy. Each results in final authority being placed somewhere other than God and His Word.⁸

To some extent Mathison’s comments can be directed to the conflict between Anderson’s interpretation of the role of the Bible and that put forward in the Westminster Confession of Faith, where “use of the ordinary means” is necessary for a sufficient understanding of scripture.⁹ For Mathison, this notion of solo *scriptura*—the idea that only the Bible can be considered authoritative—was not a doctrine of the early church, and here it further illustrates the issues with Anderson’s use of the term “historic Christian faith.”

Each of these points can be examined in the same way. These are the core issues of the Protestant-Catholic debate, such that, as Smith

8. Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), 238–9. He indicates that the term *sola scriptura* was coined in 1997 by Douglas Jones to refer to “this aberrant Evangelical version of *sola scriptura*.” Mathison references Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 22. It is worth noting in the context of this essay that Mathison’s proposal for *sola scriptura* is one that he claims was believed and used by the “early church.” Mathison himself follows the Reformed Protestant tradition.

9. Westminster Confession of Faith, <http://theconfessionproject.com/wmcf.html> (accessed 23 June 2010).

puts it, “literally thousands of monographs, dissertations and articles have been addressed to the question”¹⁰ of comparative religion.

A Polemical Work

Hamlet: O! but she'll keep her word.

King: Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in 't?

Hamlet: No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest; no offence i' the world.¹¹

Why the fuss over such a short phrase in Anderson's preface? He follows his remarks on the historic Christian faith with this statement:

I submitted the most controversial chapters to faithful Latter-day Saints for critique, who, along with others, have helped me to avoid words that might seem contemptuous or argumentative. . . . I hope to provide insight about the subject, but also to model a way of interacting with others that speaks the truth in love, with gentleness and respect. Ironically, Latter-day Saints will probably view this as an “anti-Mormon” book despite my efforts to be fair and kind, simply because I have not agreed with them. (p. 7)

This is an interesting argument. Does carefully choosing words—and avoiding those that seem particularly argumentative—actually make a text less polemical (or even nonpolemical)? Does this help one avoid the label of “anti-Mormon”? And has Anderson succeeded in this endeavor? Does an anti-Semitic or anti-Catholic text become something else if the author is trying to be “kind and fair” and avoids argumentative language? Does the atheist who presents his arguments in a way that avoids contemptuous language become somehow less anti-religious?

Jonathan Smith provides a vocabulary to clarify the polemical discussion taken from the writings of Joseph Priestley. Priestley wrote

10. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, vii.

11. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 3, scene 2.

that the early church had those whom he identifies as “philosophical” or “Platonizing” Christians. These “adapted,” “accommodated,” “added” to, “adopted,” made “agreeable,” “annexed,” “built” on, “derived,” “extended,” “introduced,” “mixed,” “modified,” “received,” and so on, religious ideas from a variety of sources and thereby infected ancient doctrine and genuine Christian principles.¹² Likewise, for Anderson, Joseph Smith starts from a position that is quite close to Anderson’s own historic Christian faith. But soon Joseph’s teachings were “embellished” (p. 32) and “developed” and became “innovations” (p. 48). Joseph “expands” (p. 54), items were “added,” “a revision” was made, and things were “corrected” (p. 56) and “borrowed” (p. 58) until what Joseph taught became “increasingly distant from both the Book of Mormon and the Bible” (p. 48), and hence from historic Christian faith. As Anderson later tells us, “To Latter-day Saints, raising issues like this will probably seem like an ‘anti-Mormon’ attack. A sincere inquirer should not be expected to ignore honest questions that bear on the Book of Mormon’s credibility. Yet we should raise these questions with sensitivity and humility” (p. 70).

There would be little difference if we were to simply take from Joseph Priestley’s work and substitute Mormonism for the “philosophical” or “Platonizing Christians.” Of course, this isn’t how Joseph Smith or his followers described what happened. For them, they were abandoning neither the Bible nor the Book of Mormon; instead they were continuing to restore the doctrines of the gospel of Jesus Christ according to the primitive church. So in section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants we read this from then prophet Joseph F. Smith: “While I was thus engaged, my mind reverted to the writings of the apostle Peter, to the primitive saints scattered abroad throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, and other parts of Asia, where the gospel had been preached after the crucifixion of the Lord” (Doctrine and Covenants 138:5).

And to Anderson’s explicit statement of honest inquiry, Jonathan Smith seems to respond: “The question is not merely one of a revised

12. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 9–12. The list here is taken from Smith, but it is only a small sampling.

taxonomy, urgent as that may be, but of interests. The history of the comparative venture reviewed in these chapters has been the history of an enterprise undertaken in bad faith. The interests have rarely been cognitive, but rather almost always apologetic.”¹³ In short, Anderson’s book is not a book about “understanding.”

It is not going to “model” a new way of interacting in love, with gentleness and respect. And even in trying to avoid contemptuous or argumentative language Anderson fails. Why? The entire method, the process, the way of presenting, according to Jonathan Smith, poisons everything with the centuries of debate, inspired by the Catholic-Protestant polemic of the past. Hence the language, despite Anderson’s appeal to having a more respectful and more gentle discussion, is nonetheless still the language of a polemic; and Anderson’s agenda is not one of understanding, but one of confrontation and attack.

Understanding the Book of Mormon?

Hamlet:

Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
 Being nature’s livery, or fortune’s star,—
 Their virtues else—be they as pure as grace,
 As infinite as man may undergo—
 Shall in the general censure take corruption
 From that particular fault: the dram of eale
 Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
 To his own scandal.¹⁴

After Anderson has provided his readers with his list of cast members and a basic synopsis, he explains at the end of chapter 3 that “the next chapter takes another look inside the Book of Mormon—this time not to understand its story line, but to learn more about its message” (p. 39). This sounds quite appealing. Finally, a look at the meaning of the Book of Mormon—especially as it compares to that historic

13. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 143.

14. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, scene 4.

Christian faith. But the results are disappointing. With Anderson's need for an apologetic message, the Book of Mormon apparently does not provide a very fruitful ground.

In the first paragraph of chapter 4, Anderson observes: "Yet many central doctrines espoused by the LDS church are not found in the Book of Mormon. In many ways, its teachings resemble biblical doctrines more than they do the later teachings of Joseph Smith and contemporary Mormonism" (p. 40). The core of his conclusion is curious. His primary objection is that, while "the picture of Jesus presented in the Book of Mormon is similar to that of the Bible," "the Book of Mormon tells us too much about Jesus" (pp. 41–42). Anderson is actually critical of the message of the Book of Mormon.

Anderson also discusses the notion that the Book of Mormon doesn't teach *sola gratia*—salvation by grace alone. Rather, it presents a "progression: if you turn from ungodliness, and if you love God completely, then God's grace is sufficient. The Book of Mormon, then, teaches salvation by a combination of God's grace added to human exertion" (pp. 45–46). This is, however, merely a slight difference in the order of events in Anderson's theology: "According to the Bible, a person is saved by God's grace, through a response of turning from sin and trusting in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This leads to a changed life characterized by good works" (p. 45).

It appears that, from Anderson's perspective, grounded as it is in some variety of evangelical religiosity, individuals are first justified by grace through faith alone, and then they may, if already predestined to salvation, respond to being saved by turning from sin and trusting in Jesus Christ. But the actions of individuals can have no significant impact on whether salvation takes place. Why? If God predestines one for salvation, there is nothing that person can do about it.

Anderson quotes passages from the Book of Mormon that serve his polemical purposes. But he does not quote language that provides a far more nuanced perspective of the Book of Mormon's teachings on divine mercy, sanctification, or justification: "I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move

and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants” (Mosiah 2:21). This raises a substantial issue about which a great deal has been written. Anderson’s goal, though, is not to understand but to polemicize; once Anderson finishes with these criticisms his interest in the Book of Mormon “and its message” flies out the window. When the Book of Mormon doesn’t provide sufficient contrast to his historic Christian faith, Anderson moves on to current LDS theology and practices. His focus turns from examining the Book of Mormon, which has “much in common with biblical doctrine” (p. 47), to questioning the LDS understanding of the nature of God, the preexistence, our continued existence after death, and other LDS views that conflict with his Calvinist theology. These issues, Anderson admits, don’t reflect the teachings of the Book of Mormon. He tells us: “These concepts are not found anywhere in the Book of Mormon” (p. 43). “Again, later teachings of Mormonism go far beyond what the Book of Mormon teaches” (p. 44). “These doctrines, too, are not found in the Book of Mormon” (p. 44). “None of these ideas are derived from the Book of Mormon” (p. 46). “Yet this view does not seem to reflect the Book of Mormon” (p. 43). But Anderson never explains how these views conflict with his evangelical beliefs or why these views are incompatible with his historic Christian faith. Perhaps he merely assumes that his audience will be familiar with his evangelical theology—but many, if not most, LDS readers will simply assume that these doctrines represent early Christian beliefs restored through Joseph Smith and later LDS prophets.

At the end of chapter 4 we know far more about what the Book of Mormon does not teach than we know about what it does teach. Anderson wants to have his cake and eat it too. He asks, “How do we know the truth?” And he insists that “the kind of test” he has “spelled out is not experience but comparison of doctrinal truth” (p. 84) contained in contemporary evangelical theology. He looks for truth by examining everything he can about the Book of Mormon except its crucial prophetic message about the saving power of Jesus Christ.

The Criticisms

At the beginning of his book, Anderson tries to impress upon the reader his qualifications to speak on Mormon topics. He tells us of his experience “growing up Mormon and leading a [Protestant] church in Utah.” The inside panel to the front cover describes him as an “adult convert to Christianity.” His church’s Web site tells us that “Pastor Anderson . . . is a Utah native, born and raised in the LDS Church. He came to a saving faith in Christ in 1976.”¹⁵ In that year Anderson was a freshman in his undergraduate program in biochemistry at the University of California, San Diego. Certainly he grew up in a Latter-day Saint family, but finding a “saving faith” as a teenager doesn’t exactly correspond to being an adult convert, and Anderson could probably have clarified that the church he led in Utah was an evangelical church. Similarly, Anderson’s perspective of the Book of Mormon is quite similar to that which many young people have of their religious texts—more an object to be pointed to than a source of wisdom and understanding. In some ways, his *Understanding the Book of Mormon* fits this description quite well.

There is much in this book that deals with evidences of various sorts. An apologetic text needs to have a systematic approach to dealing with evidence. Of course, my essay here is also an apologetic text. I make no pretenses about it. But there is a need for such things. As Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Adams:

I have read his [Priestley’s] Corruptions of Christianity, and Early Opinions of Jesus, over and over again; and I rest on them, and on Middleton’s writings, especially his letters from Rome, and [his letter] to Waterland, as the basis of my own faith. These writings have never been answered . . . therefore I cling to their learning, so much superior to my own.¹⁶

15. www.wasatchchurch.org/app/w_page.php?id=9&type=section (accessed 10 June 2010).

16. Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, quoted in Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 20. Smith references Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 2:369.

Anderson is quite content to be the provider of superior learning. Just before his concluding remarks, he tells us that we don't need to read the Book of Mormon to understand it. He tells his readers that "you've gained a lot of insight about the Book of Mormon as you've read this book" (p. 85). And in his concluding remarks he claims that his "hope is that you will be prepared to talk to your Mormon neighbors and friends when the opportunities arise. . . . So my prayer is that God will use you to help others discover the truth, as you graciously share with them the insights you have learned" (p. 93).

I have striven to look closely at a few of Anderson's claims: first, his claims about the Bible and his belief in it, which he then compares to what he thinks is the Latter-day Saint understanding of the Bible; and, second, his approach to those whom Latter-day Saints see as prophets. The other issues that Anderson raises are not new, and all of them have been previously addressed by LDS literature in great detail.

Anderson introduces his discussion of the relationship between the Book of Mormon and the Bible in this way: "A closer look at the relationship between the two books suggests that the Book of Mormon may have borrowed much of its content directly from the Bible" (p. 58). This is not an unexpected claim. After all, the Bible (as we have it now) was put together relatively late. Its texts were often circulated independently, and the individual books borrowed extensively from one another. Take for example an entire chapter of material that is found in both 2 Samuel 22 and Psalm 18. There are numerous other examples, but the religious texts of Israel and later of Judah borrowed from each other, just as the New Testament frequently uses the Old Testament.

Anderson's point, invariably, is that these borrowings point to a modern authorship. But the borrowings in the Old Testament can also point to a different issue that Anderson raises. He tells us, referring to the Bible's reliability, that

in graduate school, I studied the text of Isaiah found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which predated the oldest previously known copy of Isaiah by one thousand years. Even over ten centuries of copying, the two texts showed only trivial differences. Far

from many “plain and precious things” having been removed, no major biblical doctrine is affected by any scribal error. (p. 61)

This is an interesting argument. But there are other ways to look at the evidence. And in this case, we turn to those parallel texts of 2 Samuel 22 and Psalm 18. In a recent study, David J. A. Clines discusses this particular set of passages, including their differences. “We have had in our hands, however, in the Masoretic text itself the best evidence for its instability we could ask for, namely, the existence of variant parallel texts, i.e. texts in double transmission.”¹⁷ In this particular case, he divides the differences between the two texts into three categories: additions (he finds 49), changes in word order (there are 3), and other variants (he finds 52). So between these two chapters in the Masoretic text, he identifies 104 different variants. And he tells us that

since, as I believe can easily be demonstrated, the two texts transmit a single original text, every variant shows one text or the other to be corrupt. If the text of 2 Samuel 22 // Psalm 18 is at all typical of the Hebrew Bible, *one word in four in the Hebrew Bible may be textually corrupt*. Since we cannot know which word in each set of four words is likely to be the corrupt one, we could find ourselves in a situation of radical doubt about the text of the Hebrew Bible. *But things are worse than they appear*.¹⁸

How are things worse? Clines then takes all of the variants of this passage from the Dead Sea Scrolls and from other ancient versions (like the LXX). He eliminates those that are clearly scribal errors and suggests that

what is especially interesting is not just the existence of such variants but their number. I found in the evidence of Qumran

17. David J. A. Clines, “What Remains of the Hebrew Bible? Its Text and Language in a Postmodern Age,” *Studia Theologica* 54 (2001): 76.

18. Clines, *What Remains of the Hebrew Bible?* 78, emphasis added in last sentence.

and the Septuagint 73 variants to our parallel texts of 2 Samuel 22 and Psalm 18. I conclude therefore that we know of the existence in pre-Masoretic times of 177 variants within this poem. . . . If 177 words have attested variants, *almost one word in two* (2.16, to be exact) is textually open to question. Is there any reason why we should not extrapolate this state of affairs to the rest of the Hebrew Bible?¹⁹

All of these errors, Clines explains, crept in before the Masoretes began their careful copying of the text. The purpose of his article was to discuss the ways in which this issue can be addressed. This is not so difficult an issue for the Church of Jesus Christ as it is for Anderson's evangelical belief. It is hard to claim that "the Bible alone is God's final authoritative word to humanity" when you suspect that it may be inaccurate, and worse when you cannot say where that inaccuracy lies. One of the problems with comparative religious polemic of this sort is that it works with blinders. It addresses merely those issues that it feels it needs to for its partisan apologetic agenda. It does not recognize external scholarship or alternative viewpoints. Anderson points to Bruce Metzger in his footnotes for support. But if we turn to other scholars, we get a different view altogether. Bart Ehrman, for example, tells us that

there are certain views of the inspiration of Scripture, such as the one I had pounded into me as a late teenager, that do not stand up well to the facts of textual criticism. For most Christians, who don't have a conservative evangelical view like the one I had, these textual facts can be interesting, but there is nothing in them to challenge their faith, which is built on something other than having the very words that God inspired in the Bible. . . . In any event, as I indicated, these theses themselves were almost entirely noncontroversial. Who can deny that we have thousands of manuscripts? Or hundreds of thousands of variants? Or that lots of the variants involve spelling?

19. Clines, *What Remains of the Hebrew Bible?* 80, emphasis in original.

Or that scholars continue to debate what the original text was in lots of places? All of these statements are factually true.

The one statement that has stirred up controversy is my claim that some of these variations are significant. This view has been objected to by some conservative evangelicals and no one else that I know of. That gives me pause—why is this criticism coming only from people with a particular set of theological views?²⁰

Part of the reason this kind of discussion (on the Bible) gets included in *Understanding the Book of Mormon* stems back to the polemical debates between Catholicism and Protestant Christianity. Anderson discusses the issues involved with errors and anachronisms in the text of the Book of Mormon—but it comes primarily from an evangelical set of theological views. Latter-day Saints, despite the article of faith suggesting that “we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God” (Articles of Faith 1:8), simply do not have the associated theology that an Evangelical does. For the Saints, there is no *sola scriptura* since religious texts are allowed to contain errors and to be incomplete—and even more, noncanonical texts can contain truth, if read by those enlightened by the Spirit (Doctrine and Covenants 91). And while Anderson’s assertion may be a useful apologetic in a text written primarily for Evangelicals, it loses its force among Latter-day Saints. Ehrman notes that “these textual facts can be interesting” without being a challenge to faith. But in his apologetic endeavor, Anderson has failed to provide his evangelical audience with an approach that will achieve his objectives: “my hope is that you will be prepared to talk to your Mormon neighbors and friends when opportunities arise” (p. 93).

Likewise, the implications of prophets are spelled out quite clearly from Anderson’s point of view. He tells us that “every LDS Church president is viewed by Mormons as a prophet, seer, and revelator. Thus no holy book carries final authority in Mormonism. In the end, the

20. Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 185.

word of a living prophet stands above the authority of written scripture” (p. 50).

Much of Anderson’s discussion of prophets hinges on a single issue—that a prophet (who claims to reveal God’s word) must in some way be infallible. Perhaps he assumes that we have a doctrine of an infallible prophet (much as he has a doctrine of an infallible biblical text). And Anderson points his view back to the historical debate: “We are also cautious because history affords many examples of religious leaders who have tried to undermine the Bible’s unique authority in order to introduce their own” (p. 51). For Anderson’s theology, the message of a prophet is completely beside the point. It is the existence of a prophet as one who can reveal something from God apart from the Bible that is the offense. It is a question of authority. For the Saints, who see final authority resting with God and not with a text or a person, such attacks simply don’t carry the same weight.

The Latter-day Saint view is illustrated in one particular narrative in the Book of Mormon (one referenced by Anderson as well). After Lehi receives and shares his vision of the tree of life (1 Nephi 8), Nephi’s narrative provides us with two responses. His own response is to ask God for the vision, which he receives, although it is experienced and therefore different from his father’s vision (1 Nephi 11–14). The other response is that of Laman and Lemuel, who ask Nephi to explain the vision. Nephi asks them, “Have ye inquired of the Lord?” They respond: “We have not; for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us” (1 Nephi 15:8–9).

Because of his evangelical perspective (and despite his upbringing in the Mormon faith), Anderson has missed an essential Latter-day Saint belief—namely, the most important revelation we have is the one we personally receive from God. Anderson claims to understand the Book of Mormon. He fails at this endeavor in every way. He fails to understand it as an object at the center of a religious movement. He fails to understand the meaning of its texts. He fails to understand the role it plays in the lives of believing members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And his book—a polemical comparison between his notion of a historic Christian faith and the Church of

Jesus Christ—is merely another example in a long list of examples of such works.

The other side of his intention—“to interact with Mormonism in a spirit of kindness and civility” (p. 7)—suffers equally, for Anderson frames his discussion entirely in terms that are long familiar from the polemics of comparative religion. In doing so he distances himself and his readers from any understanding of Mormonism from the perspective of its believers.