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Afterword

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Afterword

EDITOR:

Some years ago, when I first came to Provo and was asked to teach a Sunday School class of eleven- or twelve-year-olds, I was surprised when I discovered a lesson which had been taught to me many years before as a boy in the Washington D.C. Ward. The plot of the story ran like this—a player on a baseball team had been taught in church that honesty pays and that no matter what the situation Latter-day Saints should adhere to the principle. The young player's faith in this principle was sorely tested when he was engaged in a critical baseball game in which, as I recall, his team was behind. He hit a long fly ball over the outfielder's head and circled the bases to slide into home plate a fraction behind the ball, and he knew he had been tagged out. The umpire, however, had difficulty judging the play, for the dust at home plate was thick. The player wanted to be called safe for the sake of his team but remembered his Sunday School teaching and told the umpire he was out, and so the play was called. The player had let the team down, and he felt some regrets at doing so but continued to play as his team fell further behind. When he came up to the plate in the ninth inning with the bases loaded and the team still behind by several runs, he knew he needed a home run to win the game. Again he hit a long fly and circled the bases, sliding in home ahead of the ball. Once more the umpire was unsure of his call, but when the player said he was safe, the umpire believed him because of his previous honesty. The moral of the story was clear enough—honesty always pays, and in the end it will benefit not only the moral character of the individual, but also the team.

It may be naïve, but somehow I have thought as a historian that I should adhere to the principle of honesty and that if I followed the evidence which I found through historical research and argued from it, all of it whether I liked it or not, that in the end I would be a better historian. Also, maybe in the end, as the story promised, I would be able to help the team, too.

It would seem from Gary Novak's piece in a previous issue of *BYU Studies* on naturalism and the Book of Mormon that we are no longer to adhere to this simple Sunday School morality when writing

history and make complete honesty our standard. Rather, we are to select only that evidence which supports the team. I will get back to that point later. It would almost seem from Novak that nothing I have done has helped the team, that my work has been deceptive and calculated to undermine the faith.

But Novak has not demonstrated anything here except his misunderstanding of my purpose and arguments and his inability to draw conclusive inferences from the text. His logic is faulty, being circuitous. His thesis runs like this—the first New Mormon historians were Fawn Brodie and Dale Morgan. She wrote a biography of Joseph Smith in 1945 in which she labeled Joseph a fraud, and Morgan wrote an unpublished study of Mormonism which also questioned its truth. They were avowed atheists and thus approached Mormon history from a naturalistic viewpoint. The New Mormon historians employ naturalistic arguments, hence they must be atheists too. The inevitable conclusion to which this dubious logic leads appears in Novak's comment upon my work: "Social stress theories of revelation, the cultural connections of teachings in the Book of Mormon with the Calvinism of Joseph's immediate environment—all involve implicit assumptions about such questions as the existence of God." Novak accuses me of being an atheist but offers as proof only his interpretation of the meaning of some of my passages.

Novak's argument is filled with nonsequiturs. It breaks down logically because he does not prove that Brodie had the kind of influence on me or any other New Mormon historian that he claims. After introducing Morgan, he says nothing about Morgan's influence at all. Rightly so, for Morgan's book came out long after the time with which Novak is dealing and had no influence on the New Mormon History. But Novak ignores such inconsistencies in order to argue guilt by association.

Novak's simplistic contention that the New Mormon History began with Brodie and Morgan depends upon dogmatic declaration, not proof. Historian Robert Flanders is cited in support of the idea that Brodie was a catalyst, but Novak misrepresents what Flanders said. Flanders argued that the New Mormon historians had gotten away from the old polemics, from attacking or defending the Mormon faith. In this regard Flanders said Brodie was a "transitional" figure whose work was used by subsequent historians as a "referent point." It is important to notice that Flanders did not say that these New Mormon historians approved of Brodie's work, only that they reacted to it. In actuality Leonard Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom*, published in 1958, was more of a catalyst than Brodie's volume, and Arrington differed sharply from Brodie in leaving open the possibility of a divine origin for Mormonism: "The true

essence of God's revealed will, if such it be," he said, "cannot be apprehended without understanding of the conditions surrounding the prophetic vision." Arrington was no Brodie, assuming dogmatic opposition to the divine in Mormonism, but a loyal Latter-day Saint, leaving the question of revealed truth in Mormonism for others to decide. He became the Church historian after writing his book. The *New Mormon History* did not begin with Brodie but was in part a reaction against her work by a later generation, using new sources from the Church archives with full approval of the General Authorities and asking different questions from those of Brodie or Morgan.

Novak's inferential logic breaks down further when he fails to show that all naturalists are atheists. To be sure, a dictionary definition of naturalism is that it is a view of the universe which excludes the divine, and this may be why Novak employed the term. But the definition is too sweeping. Not all those who employ naturalistic arguments are atheists. In fact it could be argued now that the use of naturalism in geology, archaeology, anthropology, botany, history, and many other disciplines is so universal that it implies no statement at all about one's religious beliefs.

The Puritans were employing naturalistic arguments by 1700 but were not atheists. They distinguished between primary and secondary causes. Thomas Jefferson was denounced in New England in 1798 as an atheist, yet he had appealed to nature and nature's God in his Declaration of Independence. And Daniel Boorstin has shown that Jefferson was not an atheist. Medical doctors in Provo employ naturalistic assumptions in their work, yet some are bishops and stake presidents. Should we label them atheists? In fact, B. H. Roberts, Hugh Nibley, and Richard Bushman in their major works also employ environmental and naturalistic arguments. Does the logic hold true for them?

Novak and others who argue this way cannot or do not wish to understand that the secular emphasis of Brodie and Morgan went out in religious studies in the 1940s. When I began my graduate training in American religious history at the University of Chicago, questioning one's religious faith was considered bad taste among faculty and students. One of my professors, Sidney E. Mead, startled a class of students of diverse backgrounds and beliefs one day by challenging them to consider the question: "Why couldn't Moroni have appeared to Joseph Smith?" He wanted to make the students aware of their own secular or sectarian biases.

I believe that Novak's and others' difficulty in dealing with my work and that of other new historians is that they approach it from a dualistic mind set which sees gospel truth on one side and secular and Satanic things on the other. From this perspective they approach the historical past with just one question in mind—does

it prove the gospel true? Brodie had a similar mind set, only in reverse. She asked the same question but was convinced history proves it to be false.

To identify my work or that of other major New Mormon historians with Brodie's or Morgan's is an enormous distortion employed by those who wish to silence points of view other than their own. Fawn Brodie was excommunicated from the Church and was a self-confessed disbeliever. The argument here is one of guilt by assumed association and involves substantial malice. The New Mormon historians are a large, diverse group of people. Most of them are active and believing Latter-day Saints, some of whom teach at Brigham Young University. The New Mormon historians deserve a fairer and more accurate evaluation.

Rather than attempting to write a more convincing history, their opponents have relied upon name calling or a misapplication of certain hermeneutical arguments which contend that no objective history is possible. Novak cites these arguments in his text and footnotes, but there is a certain irony here. While doubting the merits of the historical method, Novak would defend a religion whose principal claim to authority depends upon its historicity. While wanting historians to prove Mormonism, Novak adopts a philosophy which says proof is impossible. Furthermore, while depending upon a philosophical viewpoint which would say that it is impossible to know another man's mind, Novak claims to know my mind better than I do.

Novak's comments on my views begin with his assertion that my attitudes toward Fawn Brodie's biography are ambivalent. Although I wrote two major criticisms of her biography, he affirms this ambiguity because I wrote that she had written a powerful book which retains its authenticity. I was thinking here only of her considerable influence upon American historians and of how much of what she wrote still persuades them.

It is obvious from Novak's own quote that I considered her book seriously flawed. I said that she was still preoccupied with questions from her Mormon past—was Joseph Smith really a prophet?—a question she could not finally answer although she believed she could. I also said that the work was flawed due to its *secular* bias, that in trying to treat a religious subject from a secular viewpoint Brodie misrepresented Joseph Smith. Thus my criticism was largely based upon my objection to her cynical view that if Mormonism could not be true (her starting assumption), it must be a grand, deliberate fraud. Clearly stated in my article in *Church History* and consuming most of the pages of the text, my objection could not have escaped Novak unless he misunderstood the piece.

In effect, my criticism of Brodie was written in light of the changing attitudes toward religious history cited above. I said that Brodie's *secular* bias had distorted the way she treated Joseph Smith's "visions, his gold digging, his Book of Mormon, his and his family's alleged irreligion, his history, his witnesses and his polygamy." My criticism of Brodie insisted that by failing to take religion seriously she missed a major part of the character of Joseph Smith. I criticized Brodie because she was obsessed with environmental explanations of Mormonism and saw it as mimicking other movements and copying their ideas. She ignored those forces that came from within which were not borrowed and which gave it merit as a genuine religious movement with its own inner dynamics. I argued that it deserved reconsideration on those grounds. All of these criticisms are ignored by Novak. It seems of no worth to him that I tried to create a more favorable view of the Church among professional historians. Apparently one must argue that the gospel is true or risk being labeled an atheist.

Novak contends that I agree with Brodie on the origin of the Book of Mormon but does not quote me to that effect. His logic on atheism is faulty because faith in God does not depend upon faith in the historicity of the Book of Mormon, as important as that is in Mormon thought. Some in the Church have expressed doubts as to its historicity but still accept it as a divine revelation and scripture. Christians outside the Church may doubt its historicity but believe in the Bible and in God. But Novak ignores the fact that I said in my earliest publication that I did not agree with Brodie that Ethan Smith's theme in *View of the Hebrews* and that in the Book of Mormon were identical. Brodie overlooked their differences. Novak also ignores my critique of the Spaulding theory. He must skip much to make his argument seem plausible. Unlike Brodie, I have not discussed the origin of the Book of Mormon except to review what Joseph Smith and others have said about it. But Novak infers that my comments about its contents imply a final answer as to the scripture's naturalistic origins. In this he misreads what I have said.

In saying that the Book of Mormon was of a "romantic disposition" in its plot and characters, I only meant that it is dualistic in its conceptions of issues and people—they are either good or bad. Since Latter-day Saints believe that Mormon edited the records, this dualism could originate from Mormon rather than from the original authors. But my comment says nothing about the book's origin; that is Novak's assumption. In saying that the view of man in the book is negative and Calvinistic, I was characterizing its point of view, as historians of ideas do, not making a statement about authorship. I might have characterized it as Pauline, or even psalmist. Since Hugh

Nibley contends that theological issues regarding the nature of man go far back into human history, I did not believe my comment implied anything about the date of the material.

Novak handles ideas ineptly when he quotes my passage, “there was certainly more continuity between the money-digging religious culture and the early Mormon movement than some historians have recognized,” and remarks that Hill “much like Brodie, . . . has also linked the Book of Mormon with . . . Joseph Smith’s ‘magical world view.’” The Book of Mormon is *not mentioned* in this passage and is not linked to anything. Using this kind of analysis, a person can find whatever he or she wants in a passage. But in saying that the money-digging culture had a religious side, I really differed sharply with Brodie, borrowing on some arguments made by Richard Bushman and Ronald Walker. Brodie saw money digging as irreligious, I do not. Brodie saw it as evidence Joseph Smith was a fraud, I do not. Again, Novak imposes his single question upon my writing and comes up with a Brodie-like conclusion.

That the Book of Mormon addresses some theological and other issues discussed in America in 1830, as Grant Underwood, among others, has argued, seems evident. But Brodiean conclusions are not in order here. For one thing it could be argued that the text is prophetic and Blake Ostler has suggested that there might be elements of both ancient and 1830 American culture in it. But I would not exclude the possibility also that one finds what he knows in the text—that an Americanist will find Americanisms and Egyptologist Egyptian elements, and so on. As Hugh Nibley has argued, it is very difficult to claim finality in such matters. I meant what I said when I criticized Brodie for assuming she had final answers when other explanations might be possible. When it comes to the ultimate truth of our religious claims, no historian can provide a final answer.

Thus there is room for religious faith. I do believe, however, that there are areas the historian can deal with in Mormon history and can, blessed with the rich sources that we have in church archives, advance some interpretations which have the likelihood of accuracy. I am not as skeptical as certain hermeneuticists and think there is grave danger in any Mormon historian adopting their perspective: the possibility that we can say anything with validity beyond our own cultural mind-set is then wiped out and with it hope that we have a true history to tell the world. It is indeed paradoxical that any Mormon would advance such a relativistic theory and assume that doing so is in the interest of the Church. This theory reflects, I think, what amounts to an intellectual crisis in Mormonism in which all are involved, albeit some without awareness. But that is a matter to be taken up at another time.

Novak affirms that my suggestion that social stress provides a stimulus to revelation excludes the divine. I thought it was agreed long ago by Mormon writers like James E. Talmage that divine revelation comes in response to human need and human inquiry. Joseph Smith himself tells us that many factors in Palmyra brought him to a point of confusion and caused him to take his concerns to the Lord. Novak seems to believe, wrongly in my view, that we must now insist that Joseph's human needs had nothing to do with his vision. It seems to me that all revelation comes from God through man and this requires human involvement, if only in trying to convey the message to others. If vision comes in response to acute individual need, during anxiety or stress, it is no less a revelation. Novak again reads Brodie's assumptions into my work without substantial grounds. Novak and others like him keep bringing Brodie into the discussion so much that I wonder just who it is that is influenced by her arguments. I have long since dismissed her.

If ever there was a piece of intellectual history which suggests the merits of certain hermeneutical criticisms of history, it is this one. Novak and those with his dualistic world view pay little heed to a text, reading in what they wish to find and ignoring the rest. Thus, I indicated in one of my early criticisms of Fawn Brodie that I was adopting her secular perspective simply to show other historians that even in her own way of thinking her conclusions did not follow. This objective is ignored, and Novak criticizes me for sharing her assumptions. In point of fact the problem is Novak's assumptions. He never gets beyond his dualism. Novak is welcome to his assumptions, but no one should mistake his work for scholarship. The scholar's job is to understand another man's thought on his own terms, to tell us what it is the other man thinks he is doing. That must be the starting point before any fair evaluation can be assessed. Beginning such a task requires someone with an entirely different mind set.

I like Novak's appeal to the Old Testament as a model for what our Church history should be. I agree that such a history might be a considerable improvement upon what we now have. But Novak once more handles ideas ineptly. He says that we should do what the Hebrews did and carefully select our sources to support the faith. It is just this tendency on the part of the traditional historians to select sources *too carefully* that spurred on the New Mormon historians. Be that as it may, he overlooks the enormous difference between the Old, or indeed the New Testament version of history and that written by most Mormon traditionalists. The Hebrews put all their failings and more into their history, depicting their most honored leaders as men of passion, vanity, lust, and deceit. The Hebrews told

us that Moses killed a man, that Jonah was an arrogant prophet who demanded that his prophecies be fulfilled, that David the King and Chosen One was lustful and murderous, that Abraham was deceitful to the pharaoh regarding Sarah. Likewise in the New Testament we learn apostles Peter and Paul disagreed bitterly over how much of the Jewish law was mandatory for Christian believers. And Paul went so far as to ignore the apostles in Jerusalem during the first three years of his mission.

Against this model, some traditionalist Mormon history does not fare well, for its purpose seems to be to screen out human foibles rather than, as with the Hebrews, to show that even the best fall short of the glory of God. Richard Bushman challenged us some years ago to begin to write more in the style of the early New Englanders where God's controversy with the Saints is stressed. If this style were adopted the yawning gap between what we say of our early people and what is actually found written in their diaries, letters, and journals could be bridged without the fundamentals of the faith being jeopardized. This history would be more accurate and perhaps school us into a more charitable attitude toward ourselves and others. By all means, let some follow the Hebrew example and select sources the way they did. Then one of the reasons for the New Mormon History would be neutralized and the fissure between it and the traditional Mormon rendition could be partly bridged.

But the matter of Novak's approach to my scholarly views involves more than what would make a good history. There is the problem of questioning the religious faith of myself and others which pervades this entire piece. There was a time when the dean of a certain college said that he would not allow anyone to question the faith of another faculty member. Yet the questioning began long ago and continues still. When I first came to this university as a faculty member, some in the religion department and others were decrying members of the political science department for lack of loyalty to the nation, calling them "Communists." The term was used indiscriminately as Novak's "atheism" is used here, but that did not stop the accusations. Damage was done. Some who were among the accused then are the accusers now, seemingly acting out the scenario of an earlier day. Then as now the accusations were *ad horrendum*, that is, the very worst that could be imagined at the time. I would wonder whether the *ad horrendum* type of argument is praiseworthy and best represents the Latter-day Saint people.

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