A Response to David Wright on Historical Criticism

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A Response to David Wright on Historical Criticism

Kevin Christensen


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In an article criticizing the historicity of the Book of Mormon, David Wright described critical scholarship and traditionalist modes as contrasting paradigms used to approach the scriptures. This article explores the nature of paradigm debate in general, in that context points out weaknesses in Wright’s critical approach, and discerns crucial flaws in his definition of believing paradigms.
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Abstract: In an article criticizing the historicity of the Book of Mormon, David Wright described critical scholarship and traditionalist modes as contrasting paradigms used to approach the scriptures. This article explores the nature of paradigm debate in general, in that context points out weaknesses in Wright’s critical approach, and discerns crucial flaws in his definition of believing paradigms.

What is now proved was once only imagin’d

William Blake
“The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”¹

Several points made in David P. Wright’s article on “Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in the Search for Religious Truth”² deserve some expansion and comment. He does well to begin by talking about paradigm debate, but he does not explain the phenomenon sufficiently. Indeed, what he does not explain about paradigm debate leads directly to why I am not impressed by his position.

¹ Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, eds., Blake’s Poetry and Designs (New York: Norton, 1979), 89.
Furthermore, as paradigms of Mormon thought, Wright's article pits an enlightened "critical mode" versus a retrograde "traditional mode," a prematurely narrow paradigm choice, in my view, between a Shiz and a Coriantumr, or more appropriately, between a Fundamentalist Sherem and a debunking Korihor. To insist that "traditional modes" cannot be as open-ended and self-correcting as critical modes (see for example, Alma 32:34–36, or Joseph Smith's often expressed objection to creeds, not as false beliefs,3 but as constraints on thought),4 to make them "uncritical" by definition, stacks the deck from the outset. Indeed, Wright footnotes his discussion of traditional modes to a book called Fundamentalism.5 But of course, had Wright used the more suggestive label of fundamentalism, few Saints would bother to wade through such a transparently bogus choice of paradigms.

Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions6 does a marvelous job of explaining paradigm debate, and Ian Barbour's Myths, Models, and Paradigms7 both examine the discussion generated by Kuhn's book and applies Kuhn's observations to religious experience. Elsewhere I have argued that Alma 32 expresses an epistemology identical to Kuhn's.8

3 "I want the liberty of believing as I please, it feels so good not to be tramelled. It don't prove that a man is not a good man because he believes false doctrine." Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, The Words of Joseph Smith (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center Monograph, 1980), 183–84. Compare Paul, 1 Corinthians 13:2, 8–13.

4 Joseph Smith opposed creeds, not because they are false teachings ("all of them have some truth"), but because "creeds set up stakes, and say, 'Hitherto thou shalt come, and no further'; which I cannot subscribe to (TPJS, 327). He also explained that "The most prominent difference in sentiment between the Latter-day saints and sectarians was, that the latter were all circumscribed by some particular creed, which deprived its members of the privilege of believing anything not contained therein, whereas the Latter-day Saints have no creed, but are ready to believe all true principles that exist, as they are made manifest from time to time" (HC 5:215).

5 Wright, "Historical Criticism," 46 n. 2.


For Kuhn, scientific paradigms are defined by "standard examples of scientific work that embody a set of conceptual, methodological and metaphysical assumptions." In the sciences, according to Kuhn, such works as Aristotle's Physica, Newton's Principia, and Franklin's Electricity define "the legitimate problems and methods of a research field." They represent unprecedented achievements that attract researchers away from competing theoretical frameworks. As paradigms, they unify the scientific community around "a group-licensed way of seeing," a shared set of standards and rules for scientific practice. (Kuhn notes that scientific communities without shared paradigms tend to display chronic debate over fundamentals.) Additionally, these paradigms are extensible, mapping the known in satisfying detail, but are "sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve." Finally, paradigms provide the background of expectation against which anomaly appears. Key anomalies eventually serve as the seedbed of the next scientific revolution by attracting the attention of creative scientists.

Joseph Smith's visions and the Book of Mormon represent the "unprecedented achievements" that attracted a community of believers to Mormonism. And in Book of Mormon studies, Hugh Nibley's efforts for the Near Eastern side and John Sorenson's efforts for the Mesoamerican side have obviously defined paradigms for the most significant groups of researchers today. I would expect, just as obviously, that these historicist paradigms represent the real rivals to Wright's efforts. However, for Wright to deal directly with the "cause to believe" (Alma 32:18–19) that Nibley and Sorenson and company have developed, and to appear to have developed an "unprecedented achievement" in direct comparison might seem too difficult a problem for one article. Hence, the convenience, in Wright's article, of a "traditionalist" mode associated with no body of work in particular.

In comparing general theories (such as Newton's and Einstein's physics) neither of which is proven or provable because

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9 Barbour, Myths, Models, and Paradigms, 8.
10 Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 10.
11 Ibid., 189.
12 Ibid., 10.
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neither “solves all the problems it defines,” scientists can only ask which of the two theories better describes nature and which problems are more important to have solved. No rules govern an individual’s choice between competing theories, but values independent of any particular theory constrain the allegiance of the scientific community. Kuhn shows how theory choice depends largely on the appeal of such values as:

* accuracy of key predictions (cf. Alma 32:35)
* comprehensiveness and coherence (cf. Alma 32:34)
* fruitfulness (cf. Alma 32:36–41)
* simplicity and aesthetics (cf. Alma 32:28)
* future promise (cf. Alma 32:41)

Additionally, theory choice can be influenced by a scientist’s nationality, prior reputation, and social and biographical experiences.

In making a paradigm choice in religious matters (such as between Mormonism and Atheism, or historical and environmental views of the Book of Mormon), the decision is more subjective, but this is a matter of degree, not of kind, and the values applied are identical. Barbour remarks that “There are no proofs, but there are good reasons for judgments which are not simply matters of personal taste or individual preference.”

Wright has acquired a formidable set of critical tools, and now he sees things which were hidden. Fine. I’m interested. However, the question here is whether in acquiring his impressive set of critical tools, have those tools mastered him? As Kuhn puts it, “In learning a paradigm the scientist acquires theory, methods, and standards together, usually in an inextricable mixture. Therefore, where paradigms change, there are usually significant shifts in the

13 Ibid., 110.
14 Ibid., 147.
15 Ibid., 110.
16 Ibid., 199.
18 Ibid., 153.
19 Barbour, Myths, Models, and Paradigms, 146.
criteria in determining the legitimacy both of problems and of proposed solutions."\(^{20}\)

Wright remarks that in historical mode (I read "fundamentalist") conclusions in many respects are "predetermined."\(^{21}\) The same could be said of his critical mode to the extent that the critical scholar's tools and methods have been devised to solve problems within that paradigm. Kuhn points out that "the decision to employ a particular piece of apparatus and to use it in a particular way carries an assumption that only certain sorts of circumstances will arise."\(^{22}\)

For example, Wright gives a list of books which we should read to come up to speed on biblical criticism.\(^{23}\) I find it enlightening to compare two books not on his list. Richard Elliot Friedman's *Who Wrote the Bible?*\(^{24}\) is a popular survey of the evidence for the documentary hypothesis that dominates modern biblical scholarship. Isaac M. Kikawada and Arthur Quinn's *Before Abraham Was*\(^{25}\) challenges that hypothesis, especially as applied to Genesis 1–11.

For example, Friedman gives the critical view that the Noah story has been spliced together from two different accounts, a "I" (Yahwest) author and a "P" (Priestly) author. Everything gets said in two different ways, critical scholarship observes, and concludes that such duplication and variation can only signify dual authorship. For example, Friedman shows us the seams between authors that critical scholarship finds in the Noah account, with P in boldface and J in regular type.\(^{26}\)

But Noah found favor in Yahweh's eyes. **These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a righteous man, perfect he was in his generations. Noah walked with God.** (Genesis 6:8–9; Friedman's translation)

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21 Wright, "Historical Criticism," 29.
23 Wright, "Historical Criticism," 38 n. 57.
26 Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* 54.
And all flesh, those that creep on the earth, the birds, the beasts, and the wild animals, and all the swarming things that swarm on the earth, and all the humans expired. Everything that had the breathing spirit of life in its nostrils, everything that was on the dry ground, died. And he wiped out all the substance that was on the face of the earth, from human to beast, to creeping thing, and to bird of the heavens, and they were wiped out from the earth. (Genesis 7:21–23; Friedman’s translation)

Friedman is very impressive and convincing, even respectful and devotional. But before congratulating critical scholarship with our undying and eternal intellectual submission, and abandoning “tradition” altogether, we should note the same passages in Kikawada and Quinn.27

Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD

These are the generations of Noah

Noah was a righteous man

Perfect he was in his generations

with God walked

Noah. (Genesis 6:8–9)

And all flesh died that moved upon the earth birds, cattle, beasts, all swarming creatures that swarm upon the earth,

And every man:

everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life, died.

He blotted out every

27 Kikawada and Quinn, Before Abraham Was, 86, 95.
Man
and animals and creeping things and birds of the air;
they were blotted out from the earth. (Genesis 7:21–23)

Friedman’s book, as impressive and up to date as it is, contains
not a word about Hebrew poetic forms. The dual authorship
theory presumes that there is no other way to account for the
repetition and variation of ideas. That premise controls the obser­
vations made and determines the significance that the document­
tary hypothesis puts to its observations. But Kikawada and Quinn
gather abundant evidence that makes it painfully clear that this
premise is dead wrong and that such a critical approach is
misleading. (For example, the entire Noah story is a chiasm that
bridges P and J on the larger scale, just as in these short exam­
ples.) However, in rejecting the conclusions of two generations of
“critical” scholars, Kikawada and Quinn do not reject the ideals
or fruits of scholarship. Theirs is not an anti-intellectual approach,
but an attempt to define an alternate paradigm that is more
accurate, more comprehensive and coherent, more fruitful and
promising.

As Barbour says, a paradigm “makes a difference not only in
one’s attitudes and behavior but in the way one sees the world.
One may notice and value features of individual and corporate life
which one otherwise might have overlooked.”28 Theory influ­
ences both the selection and the significance of the data—
anomaly appears, with resistance, against a background of expec­
tation.29

Wright’s own account reveals a set of brittle background
expectations. I can easily see why his academic training raised
troubling anomalies. But consider the irony of his account of his
paradigm change in light of Kuhn’s remark that science “is a
narrow and rigid education, probably more so than any other
except perhaps in orthodox theology.”30 Wright’s crisis and
transition was virtually defined by tension between his “ortho-

28 Barbour, Myths, Models, and Paradigms, 56.
29 Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 64.
30 Ibid., 166.
dox” academic training and his brittle background expectations.31

Kuhn points out that paradigm crisis closes in three ways:32
1. Normal science handles the crisis.
2. The problem is labeled and set aside for a future generation.
3. A new paradigm emerges with the ensuing battle for acceptance. Kuhn remarks that, “Since no paradigm ever solves all the problems it defines and since no two paradigms leave all the same problems unsolved, paradigm debate always involves the question, Which problems is it more significant to have solved?”33 This recognition of necessary value judgments contradicts Wright’s claim that “putting aside these legitimate questions . . . is to require setting aside our search for and claims about being interested in historical or even religious truth.”34

In contrast, Kuhn argues that the ability to tolerate crisis, that is, to be able to shelve problems at times, is essential for the working scientist. From another perspective, what we see in Wright might be not as much a capacity to face truth without flinching as an inability to tolerate crisis. What we have in Wright’s article are simply the problems that he thinks are most important (“key matters”),35 as they appear against his peculiar background expectations.

* The Gospel through the Ages36
* Prophecy37
* Apparent Anachronism in the Book of Mormon38
* Homogeneity in the Book of Mormon Text39
* The Ambiguity of Spiritual Experience40

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31 In rushing to defend the faith from the criticisms, never forget that the disillusioned saints got their illusions somewhere.
32 Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 84.
33 Ibid., 110.
34 Wright, “Historical Criticism,” 35.
35 Ibid., 29.
36 Ibid., 30.
37 Ibid., 31.
38 Ibid., 33.
39 Ibid., 34.
40 Ibid., 36.
Before I address these issues, notice that Kuhn also points out that a new paradigm “must promise to preserve a relatively large portion of the concrete problem-solving capability” of the previous paradigm. Anyone can consult a F.A.R.M.S. catalog for a host of problems that the Book of Mormon presents for skeptics. Wright finds time to mention only the work of John Sorenson and Blake Ostler, and then only to dismiss their efforts in footnotes. In spite of the problems that Wright finds so decisively daunting, believing scholars do find the paradigm of historicity to be fruitful. Consulting the F.A.R.M.S. catalog, I find dozens of papers that never would have been conceived by a scholar who viewed the Book of Mormon as a “window to the religious soul of Joseph Smith . . . the apprentice’s workshop in which he became a prophet.”

For example, try to imagine any environmentalist writing papers like Sorenson’s “Seasonality of Warfare in the Book of Mormon” and “The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Codex,” or Allen Christenson’s “Maya Harvest Festivals and the Book of Mormon,” or Lisa Hawkins and Gordon Thomasson’s amazing “I Only Am Escaped to Tell Thee,” or anything by Welch, Nibley, Tvedtnes, or many others.

Wright, however, places none of these strengths of the Book of Mormon on the balance scale. And as he plunks down only what he considers the first and great problems for Mormonism, he acts as though his readers possess nothing of comparable weight, and that he and his partners can compel us to come follow him.

However, against my background expectations, which are neither traditional nor critical as Wright defines them, and in light of my reading of other significant matters, none of problems he describes weighs-in as a serious anomaly.

The Gospel through the Ages

I’m impressed by Wright’s erudition on the topic of ancient Hebrew sacrifice, but look closely at the “traditional” reading

41 Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 169.
42 Wright, “Historical Criticism,” 38 nn. 57, 59.
43 Ibid., 35.
that Wright says that he outgrew—"the sacrificed animals were not substitutes for the people who brought them, vicariously suffering for them."44

I do not have a problem with Wright’s explanation of the idea of sacrifices as food offerings. But I am amazed at the suggestion that in order for Mosaic sacrifice to qualify as symbolic in some way of Christ,45 the sacrificed animals should have literally been saviors—every ram, pigeon, and turtle-dove a fully efficacious scapegoat.

When I was a child, the sacrament was literally a snack, a food offering to me that did not symbolize anything. Should I nail that symbol to a single, immature, literal meaning? Symbols are, by nature, extensible products of the act of likening. Any likening involves both positive and negative analogies. To refuse to explore and extend positive analogies, and to focus only on a negative analogy, based on literalism, as Wright does in his dismissal of any Christian typology, defeats the whole purpose of the language of symbols.46 Indeed, I would propose investigating the parallels between Wright’s “food offerings” and the Bread of Life sermon in John 6, and the Last Supper in Matthew 26:26–28. The Bread of Life sermon makes no reference to the notion of “vicarious suffering.” Would Wright argue that it cannot offer any profound symbolic meaning with regard to Christ?

44 Wright, “Historical Criticism,” 36 n. 9 (emphasis mine).
45 Wright says that “The view that [Mosaic sacrifice] represented Jesus’ death seemed to be an imposition on the text” (ibid., 30). Notice the passive language, the mode favored by bureaucrats to conceal individual responsibility, and by academics wanting to create an illusion of objectivity.

Wright often resorts to such language, even when it distorts reality. For example in reference to Sorenson’s An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon, Wright says, “The attempt to reduce the geography of the Book of Mormon peoples which might be thought to reduce much of this ethical problem cannot be accepted” (38 n. 59). In fact, many people can and do accept Sorenson’s work, even if Wright does not. Here, as elsewhere, Wright selects the passive voice to conceal personal value judgments and to pose as dispassionately critical and reasonable.

46 When Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd,” anyone who protested by saying “But I checked up and found out you’re a carpenter, not a shepherd” would not be demonstrating critical thought, but rather, a complete lack of imagination. How is Jesus like a good shepherd, a tree of life, a true vine, living water, living bread, a pearl of great price, a sacrificial lamb?
Anachronisms

Regarding anachronism, I have seen so many purported Book of Mormon anachronisms turn out to be either clearly bogus, reasonably questionable, or plausible given reasonable translation factors, that I am no longer impressed by the charge. Those who present purported anachronisms never contextualize their evidence by admitting that many once-prized exhibits have turned out to be much older than once thought. In light of that circumstance, we should admit that any charge regarding the existence of Book of Mormon anachronism rests on assumptions about adequate research and translation factors. Even Blake Ostler, who I think has made some valuable contributions with his “The Book of Mormon as an Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source,” has been most vulnerable here. 47 Several of Ostler’s prize “anachronisms” have bitten the dust in just a few years. 48

Consider also how passages in the recently released fragments from the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrate how easily new findings can overturn an old conclusion about Book of Mormon use of the term “son of God.” 49 And until some sage uses a seer stone or Urim and Thummim to translate the sealed portion and tells us

47 Blake Ostler, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source,” Dialogue 20/1 (Spring 1987): 66–124. I mention Ostler’s controversial article as having made valuable contributions because too often our defenders of the faith neglect the virtue of gratitude.


what the experience is like, no one is entitled to speak with finality on translation factors.

To Wright, the parallels between the Melchizedek material in Alma 13 and Hebrews decisively indicate anachronistic derivation. But how can Wright be so certain that the arrangement in Hebrews is unique? Did the author of Hebrews compose in an utter vacuum? Has nothing significant been lost in 1800 years? In light of that uncertainty, why should the order of three elements in one chapter seem worthy of decisive mention, and such complexities as the elaborate coronation and festival practices, the interwoven chiastic forms, and the farewell address form all simultaneously running through Mosiah be unworthy of mention? And what about John Welch’s suggestions about the priority of Alma’s Melchizedek material. Why doesn’t Welch’s article rate even a footnote? Remember that Wright scoffs at the notion of scribal knowledge withholding.

52 John W. Welch, ed., Reexploring the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1992), 120.
54 Given an opportunity to write a rejoinder, I surmise that Wright will refer to his “In Plain Terms That We May Understand,” in Brent Lee Metcalfe ed., New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study: Explorations In Critical Methodology (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 165–230. There, he elaborates on the Alma 13–Hebrews relationship, and there he does refer to Welch’s article. However, I wrote this in response to the Sunstone article. With regard to Wright’s article in the Metcalfe book, see the reviews by John A. Tvedtines, John Gee, Royal Skousen, and John W. Welch in the Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 6/1 (1994): 19–23, 51–186. Here, let me call attention to footnote 2 of his article “In Plain Terms That We May Understand,” wherein Wright refers to “some striking coincidences between the Book of Mormon and the ancient world and some notable matters of Book of Mormon style” (Wright, in New Approaches, 165). Professor Wright at some point decided which problems are more significant to have solved. He is free to chose like everyone else. But by withholding identification of what even he admits is striking in the Book of Mormon, he presents only a part of his own balance scale.
Wright talks about how his new paradigm permitted him to "deal with the evidence without having to resort lamely to notions of scribal conspiracy or knowledge withholding sin to harmonize the disparity that existed between ancient and modern traditions." In light of the recent Hofmann scandals, new revelations from the latest Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as an understanding of the composition of our own History of the Church, must we consider notions of "scribal conspiracy" or "knowledge withholding" to be, in Wright's term, "lame?"

And why must the idea of knowledge withholding and the recognition of changes in religious practices and beliefs be seen as mutually exclusive? I accept the fact of changes in Judaism, Christianity, and Mormonism without trouble, but I also see knowledge withholding, done both by believers and apostates, as absurdly omnipresent and typically derived from those changes in beliefs and practices. Kuhn's chapter, "The Invisibility of Revolutions," should prove most enlightening here.

Regarding the Isaiah problem, Wright explains it well, but, I notice, no better than Nibley did in Since Cumorah in 1965 and Sidney Sperry long before that in The Improvement Era and in Our Book of Mormon. Unlike Kikawada and Quinn, who persuade me because they make a serious attempt to incorporate the observations of the documentary hypothesis into their critique, Wright makes no effort to incorporate the observations of scholars who argue for the unity of Isaiah (such as Avraham Gileadi) into his presentation. Until he does, I see no need to be impressed. His information is old, his arguments highly selective, and his conclusion is clearly subjective.

**Prophecy**

Wright says that the traditional view has been that prophets can see into the future with clarity. "This did not seem to be sustainable upon critical study." The key issues for me are Wright's demand for unambiguous and unconditional clarity on all matters

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55 Wright, "Historical Criticism," 31.
56 Ibid., 31. Again, notice the passive language—imagine a powerful computer processing data with cold efficiency, but unable to reflect on whether the programming might be faulty or the data complete and accurate.
great and small, and his labeling of that view as "traditional." Paul, for example, knew in part and prophesied in part (1 Corinthians 13:9). Alma heavily qualifies his knowledge (for example, Alma 7:8), as did Joseph Smith (D&C 10:37; 132:16). Even the Cambridge-based Bible dictionary included in my Latter-day Saint quadruple combination disagrees with the demand that prophets speak with unambiguous clarity on all future matters, calling Bible prophets "forth-tellers, rather than foretellers."

I once located more than thirty tests for prophets in the Bible. The best known test, that regarding the word of a prophet being fulfilled (Deuteronomy 18:22; Jeremiah 28:9), and the basis of the "traditional" view of prophets turns out to be the one most qualified by precept and most abused in practice. If biblical prophecies can be misrecorded, misinterpreted, subject to multiple or parallel fulfillment (parallelism being the most conspicuous characteristic of Hebrew poetry, the normal vehicle for biblical prophecy), subject to conditional or deferred fulfillment, and ambiguous regarding the timescale, how does one go about testing them? What about those cases when a prophet speaks out of turn? Lisa Bolin Hawkins and David Warby wrote a good paper for F.A.R.M.S. on this topic, showing how the Rabbis dealt with the problem of application by restricting the test to obviously short-term prophesy or consistency with accepted cannon. If, in practice, the test is workable only in rare cases, such as in Jeremiah 28 and Helaman 8–9, how can we apply the test of unambiguous historical fulfillment as the general principle of interpretation? Furthermore, if consistency with utterances of previous prophets is to be the test (as Hawkins and Warby explain), what about those situations wherein one prophet quite deliberately overrules another? (for example, as when Jesus says, "Ye have heard it said . . . but I say . . .").

But further, with regard to the anomalies for the extreme position that Wright rejects, I see Isaiah 55:8–11 as an alternate general case that works. Isaiah quotes the Lord as saying that "My

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thoughts are not your thoughts . . . [my word] shall accomplish that which I please" (see Isaiah 55:8–12).

I take this to mean that we should approach prophetic passages in light of how God’s values and perspectives differ from ours—that he takes an eternal perspective, not a temporal one, that he judges not by appearance but by what is inside, that he values experience more than success, and so forth. But especially, we should look at how God’s word functions “as rain or snow” to accomplish his purposes (fulfilled can mean “satisfied”—compare also D&C 19). What did God intend when he spoke? Did his words accomplish his intent? When God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering, did God want Isaac dead?

This changes things. And in this light, I wonder what justification has there ever been for what Wright calls the “traditional” view?

So, I disagree with Wright’s rejected premises, and find his data no trouble at all. He scoffs at “fireside speakers” and “popular writers” who “used to tally numbers in Daniel” to “tell us what was going to appear in next week’s newspapers.”58 Surely it doesn’t hurt to be wary of zealots, cranks, and snakeoil salespersons. But consider the comparative status that Wright concedes to prophets—the task of re-visioning old unfulfilled prophecies, “reapplication of unfilled prophetic hopes,”59 which hopes, in turn, Wright implies, will remain unfilled. How much divine inspiration does that take?

Wright lists a number of apparently “unfulfilled” prophesies as though they falsified the idea of predictive propheesy.60 Ian Barbour points out that paradigms resist falsification because “a network of theories and observations is always tested together. Any particular hypothesis can be maintained by rejecting or adjusting other auxiliary hypotheses.”61 I’ve not found it necessary to reject the idea of predictive propheesy, because the adjustments I’ve made to the “traditional” view permit real propheesy, parallel, distant, conditional, and deferred fulfillment, purely motivational utterances, and purely human opinions. I also see a lot of

58 Wright, “Historical Criticism,” 33.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 31–32.
61 Barbour, Myths, Models, and Paradigms, 99.
prophecy that looks amazingly predictive. Interestingly, Wright does not share the prophetic humility expressed by Alma and Paul. In asking us to reject the possibility of predictive prophecy, and to accept his view of the past and of prophets as the only reasonable position, in his stated willingness to “force” his view on us, he is in a very real sense giving us a prophesy about what the results of all study and research assuming the reality of predictive prophecy and the historicity of the Book of Mormon could ever yield.

The Ambiguity of Religious Experience

In complaining that non-Mormons have spiritual experiences, Wright again demonstrates a startlingly rigid set of background expectations. In light of such verses as Alma 29:8, where “God doth grant unto all nations, of their own tongue, to teach his word ... all that he seeth fit that they should have,” should this be problem? Even D&C 1:18 talks about “others” to whom God spoke. I had my say on this question at Sunstone West 91 with a talk on the Book of Mormon and Near Death experience research.

Wright dismisses spiritual experience as evidence and encourages submission to reason. Unfortunately, any system of reason you care to name turns out to be as self-referential as any spiritual experience, and as subject to criticism, contradiction, and ongoing revision. Where Kuhn demonstrates that science runs on faith, Alma 32 demonstrates that faith can be just as self-correcting and open-ended as science.

Wright says that “The problem with the spiritual mode is that while tradition represents it as unerring and unified, the fact of the matter is that there is a great deal of diversity in what people come to know by this route.” Are we to understand that in contrast to the spiritual mode, critical scholarship is unerring and unified? If I discern diversity of experience and opinion in scholarship, should I then loose all confidence in the value of my intellectual

62 Wright, “Historical Criticism,” 36.
64 Wright, “Historical Criticism,” 36.
Life? Pardon my jargon, but I think it is time to get real, in Alma’s sense of the term.

When I cast a critical eye on the spiritual mode as depicted in Mormon scripture, I get a very different picture than the one Wright presents as “traditional.” Alma 32:35–36 says, “Now behold, after ye have tasted this light is your knowledge perfect? Behold I say unto you, Nay.” Similarly, Doctrine and Covenants 1:24–26 says: “These commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding. And inasmuch as they erred it might be made known; And inasmuch as they sought wisdom, they might be instructed.”

Homogeneity of Religious Ideas in the Book of Mormon

Wright protests the “relative homogeneity of religious ideas” in the Book of Mormon. In a book largely edited by one man, what should we expect but a relative homogeneity? Kuhn’s chapter on “The Invisibility of Revolutions” gives insightful explanation of how and why “homogeneity of thought” occurs.

Even so, I do not believe that the Book of Mormon is as homogeneous as we’ve sometimes been led to expect. Indeed, the assumption of homogeneity has often blinded readers to the messages of the text. Wright’s complaint about racism is a good example of this: “The book offers descriptions—negative descriptions—about the personality and character of supposed Native American ancestors.”

Well, the Book of Mormon also has positive descriptions, although Wright does not so inform us. While we are posing as critical and mature, let us note that Wright fails to cite the passages from Alma 26:24–25, 31–33, and Helaman 3:50–51; 6, 13–16, and so forth, which quite deliberately undercut the racism in the passages he does cite.

65 Ibid., 34.
66 Ibid., 35.
67 Ibid., 38 n. 60.
Now, I ask—if Wright is as critical and objective and as enlightened as he claims, why this shallow, uncritical, largely knee-jerk argument ultimately based on shock value and emotional dismay, rather than on a comprehensive and critical look at all the evidence in the appropriate social, cultural, political, and temporal contexts?™

Perhaps the arguments of Korihor represent the real sore point. Wright has studied Alma 30 closely and cannot be unaware that his arguments often demonstrate homogeneity with Korihor’s. An attack on the Book of Mormon via selected Lamanite epithets provides a stance of moral superiority, whereas a frontal attack on Alma’s dismissal of Korihor might be tactically unwise. For example, Wright dismisses the notion of predictive prophesy. Korihor says “No man can know of anything which is to come” (Alma 30:13).

Wright dismisses the notion that gospel knowledge has been withheld because he sees no evidence of a pre-Christian gospel. He debunks Latter-day Saint scriptures, traditions, and teachings on the topic. Korihor says “Ye cannot know of things which ye cannot see” (Alma 30:15) and attacks “traditions . . . which lead you away into a belief of things which are not so” (Alma 30:16).

Wright undermines the value of spiritual experiences, and asks us to consider them in light of “psychophysiological”™ factors. Korihor talks about how such things come from “the effect of a frenzied mind” (Alma 30:16).

Of course, Wright does not go so far as to preach the social Darwinism and moral nihilism of Korihor. He does see some value in the religious life, and that is all to the good. But still, this sort of


69 Wright, “Historical Criticism,” 36 n. 4.
thing should give him pause, and I hope that in his personal ponders, he addresses these issues in some way.

Conclusions

Wright says "The apologetic we should be pursuing is not a defense of tradition against the reasonableness of criticism, but the formulation of post-critically re-visioned religious perspectives that allow our God-given abilities to think to flourish and a mature faith to grow." I do not object to this line of reasoning, but only with Wright's definitions of "tradition" and "mature faith." What I notice in reading people like Hugh Nibley, John Sorenson, John Welch, Jolene Rockwood, Margaret Toscano, and many, many others is that they are not defending a static tradition at all. After all, Joseph Smith took great pains to ensure that Mormonism would be a fountain of living waters, not a cistern. The finest Latter-day Saint scholars and prophets, in William Blake's term, apply corrosives that cleanse the doors of perception. What grows in me from their efforts is something I had not previously imagined or dreamed. Their scholarship is not masochistic, that is, the sort that wallows in its ability to face problems without flinching, and therefore values problems more than solutions; not pharisaical, endlessly concerned with static self-justification; but sacramental—they provide new bottles with new wine that is bittersweet at times but very desirable because you can taste the delicious light within it.

The point with reference to Wright is, why should we be in such a hurry to uncritically submit to the consensus of current Protestant scholarship? Scholarship can be, and often is, dead wrong and blind for hundreds of years on end. Tradition is often dead wrong and blind too, but fundamentalism is not my only alternative to his flavor of scholarship. There are wines of a finer vintage available for those who seek them.

70 Ibid., 35.
Reason or the ratio of all that we have already known is not the same that it shall be when we know more.

William Blake

“There Is No Natural Religion”\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{71} Johnson and Grant, \textit{Blake’s Poetry and Designs}, 15.