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More Revisionist Legerdemain and the Book of Mormon

Reviewed by Louis Midgley

*Essays on Mormon Scripture* consists of fifteen essays, twelve of which were previously published.¹ In addition to examining the stance taken on the meaning and authenticity of the Book of Mormon by its editor and publisher, in this review I will focus attention on (1) Susan Curtis’s “Early Nineteenth-Century America and the Book of Mormon” (pp. 81-96); (2) A. Bruce Lindgren’s “Sign or Scripture: Approaches to the Book of Mormon” (pp. 55-62); and (3) Mark D. Thomas’s “Scholarship and the Book of Mormon” (pp. 63-79), essays which deal explicitly with the Book of Mormon, though some attention will also be given to certain other essays in *Essays on Mormon Scripture* that tacitly take a stand on the meaning and prophetic truth claims of the Book of Mormon.

The RLDS Connection

A notable feature of *Essays on Mormon Scripture* is the inclusion of essays by RLDS authors James E. Lancaster, a mathematician; Geoffrey F. Spencer, a prominent “liberal” RLDS Apostle; Richard P. Howard, RLDS Church Historian with an M.A. in history; A. Bruce Lindgren, holder of a master’s degree in theology from St. Paul School of Theology (a

¹ Five of these essays appeared in *Dialogue*, three in *Sunstone*, and two were published in the *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, which is an RLDS publication, one in *Courage* and one in *University Bulletin*, both defunct RLDS magazines. Though not noted in *Essays on Mormon Scripture*, in two instances (both by RLDS authors) this is the third publication of an essay: James E. Lancaster’s “The Method of Translation of the Book of Mormon” (pp. 97-112) first appeared in the *Saints’ Herald*, on November 15, 1962, and then was later reprinted in the *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 3 (1983): 51-61; and William D. Russell’s “Beyond Literalism” (pp. 43-54) first appeared in *Dialogue* 19/1 (Spring 1986): 57-68, and then later in Marjorie B. Troeh and Eileen M. Terril, eds., *Restoration Studies IV* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1988), 192-201.
Methodist seminary in Kansas City) and an employee of the RLDS Temple School; and William D. (Bill) Russell, who studied for a time at St. Paul School of Theology, and who with a law degree from Iowa has taught history, political science, and religion at the RLDS Graceland College. Though Vogel neither indicates directly the grounds upon which he has made his selection of authors and essays, nor the standards by which he has in some cases rewritten the essays he included in his book, it seems clear that he desires to promote and legitimize something very much like the ideology that has stressed and altered the RLDS community since the 1960s.

Bill Russell insists that "there is no sure way to distinguish between the word of God and the words of men—or to distinguish between what is inspired and what is not" (p. 51), spelling out some of the assumptions at work in the RLDS liberal ideology. Hence, in his estimation, the authority of the Book of Mormon comes only "because it is the founding document of Mormonism and has drawn many converts to the church." And, for Russell, whatever authority the Book of Mormon may have "stems from containing the thought of the founding prophet just prior to the organization of the church. Mormon doctrine in both [the LDS and RLDS] churches has evolved considerably beyond the Book of Mormon, in ways not always consistent with the founding document" (p. 51).

2 Temple School is in the business of providing in-service training for RLDS teachers, and it also offers, through a night school at the former Presbyterian and now RLDS Park College, graduate training for their clergy.

3 For a recent account of these intriguing and instructive events, see Russell, "Defenders of the Faith: Varieties of RLDS Dissent," Sunstone 14/3 (June 1990): 14-19. Russell is, at least among Mormon historians, best known as one of the most outspoken of the RLDS "liberals." He is currently working on a history of post-1960 RLDS disputes in which he will examine the confrontation of the remnants of traditional RLDS faith with those who now control the RLDS bureaucracy and hierarchy. Even though Russell is personally sympathetic with the views of the RLDS "liberal" establishment, he seems anxious to expose some of the tactics used in dealing with RLDS primitive believers. He prefers to see all views flourish, even those with which he personally disagrees. That stance has put him at odds with the institutional imperatives of the current leaders among the RLDS.

4 Russell is willing to treat the Book of Mormon as scripture, as he understands that term, simply because "the Book of Mormon arose out of the founding experiences of Mormonism." Though some of its "teachings may not seem applicable today," Russell also allows that "some of the
Russell, who has been an important figure in the recent assault by RLDS revisionists on the traditional understanding of the Book of Mormon, claims that, in addition to his own work, five other essays provide grounds for jettisoning the traditional understanding of the Book of Mormon by reducing it to Joseph Smith’s thought prior to the organization of the Church, and hence turning it into an instance of highly imaginative and truly bizarre nineteenth-century fiction, or, put another way, into the earliest exemplar of Joseph Smith’s own primitive theological reflections cast (either knowingly or unknowingly) in archaeomorphic form. These include the following:

1. Lancaster’s 1962 essay on the “method” of translation of the Book of Mormon (pp. 97-112).

5 The down-playing of the Book of Mormon among the RLDS has been going on at least since the early 1960s. For evidence of Russell’s role in the process, in addition to his “A Further Inquiry into the Historicity of the Book of Mormon,” which was reprinted as “The Historicity of the Book of Mormon and the Use of the Sermon on the Mount in III Nephi,” in Restoration Studies II, 193-200, see his “The Historicity of the Book of Mormon: The Thought of Preexilic Israel and I & II Nephi Compared,” which is his 1977 Presidential Address to the John Whitmer Historical Association, read on September 24, 1977; and “History and the Mormon Scriptures,” Journal of Mormon History 10 (1983): 53-63, which was his 1983 Presidential Address to the Mormon History Association, read on May 7, 1983, in Omaha, Nebraska.

6 Lancaster shows that the accounts provided by those seemingly situated to know indicate that Joseph Smith did not use the Nephite interpreter (later called “Urim and Thummim”) to translate portions of the Book of Mormon that we now have (see pp. 97-107). Instead, he employed a stone which he placed in a hat, with which he was able to dictate the text of the Book of Mormon. Lancaster lists some eight “facts” about which “all witnesses agree” (see pp. 105-6). But after setting out the contents of the available accounts, Lancaster draws conclusions that run against the evidence he presented; he flatly denies that Joseph Smith did what the witnesses reported. “In some of the testimonies witnesses stated
(2) Leland Negaard, "Literary Issues and the Latter Day Saint Student," *University Bulletin* 18/4 (Spring 1966): 21-24. Negaard argued against the historicity of the Book of Mormon because of the so-called Isaiah problem, that is, because of the presence of quotations from portions of Isaiah that are now thought by biblical scholars to have been written only after the return of Jews from the Babylonian exile.7

(3) Larry W. Conrad, "The Book of Mormon: An Inquiry into Its Historicity," an unpublished paper, dated May 5, 1981. This paper was written during Conrad's sophomore year at Graceland for a course on the Book of Mormon taught by Russell, while Conrad was sorting out his views on the Book of Mormon—a course, incidentally, which has not been taught since that time. Conrad was then RLDS, but has become a

that Smith saw, or said he saw, English words appear to him in the translation process." "But regardless of this," Lancaster insists, "Joseph Smith did not regard the process as mechanical" (pp. 107-8). Instead, he holds that "the inspiration Smith received involved general concepts rather than literal information. Smith had to express in his own words and phrases the concepts which passed through his mind" (p. 108), though none of the witnesses describes such a vague "inspiration." Instead they describe a "seeing" that produced a dictation of the text of the Book of Mormon. Lancaster justifies his opinion on the grounds that Joseph Smith later changed or authorized changes in the Book of Mormon (and Doctrine and Covenants), but he neglects to explain why that fact somehow yields his conclusions. One wonders why an early and perhaps inferior essay by Lancaster was included in *Essays on Mormon Scripture* when more complete and accurate, and much less tendentious and speculative accounts are available. See Stephen Ricks, "Joseph Smith's Means and Methods of Translating the Book of Mormon," F.A.R.M.S. paper, 1986 and John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, "The Translation of the Book of Mormon: Basic Historical Information," F.A.R.M.S. paper, 1986. Edward H. Ashment has also covered essentially the same ground as Lancaster. See his "The Book of Mormon—A Literal Translation?" *Sunstone* 5/2 (March-April 1980): 10-14. Perhaps Vogel declined to include Ashment's essay because, when it was first published, he found it objectionable. See Vogel's criticism in "Is the Book of Mormon a Translation? A Response to Edward H. Ashment," *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 5/3 (1982): 75-91; and his remarks in *Indian Origins*, 75 n. 5.

7 Instead of including Negaard's essay, Vogel reprinted one by George D. Smith, owner and publisher of Signature Books, that presents, among other things, a somewhat similar argument against the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. See Smith's "Isaiah Update" (pp. 113-30), which originally appeared in *Dialogue* 16/2 (Summer 1983): 37-51.
minister for the United Methodist Church at least partly because of what he sees as a lessening of commitment to Christian fundamentals among the RLDS, including the growing tendency for their liberal leaders to see the scriptures as merely human in origin and authority.8

(4) Wayne Ham, “Problems in Interpreting the Book of Mormon as History,” Courage 1/1 (September 1970): 15-22. Ham argues that the Book of Mormon is a “nonhistorical treatise in much the same manner as modern critics view the books of Jonah, Ruth, Job, and Daniel in the Old Testament. Freed from some of the traditional hangups involved with having to accept unquestioningly the historicity of the Book of Mormon, these [liberal RLDS] members could then read the book as a product of the American frontier and honor it as an interesting artifact of the Restoration movement in the nineteenth century” (p. 21). This essay, written by a prominent RLDS appointee, is an indication that a reordering of RLDS beliefs had taken place in the RLDS bureaucracy.9

(5) The essay by Susan Curtis (pp. 81-96), originally written in 1977. Notably, the average age of these five essays is twenty years old.

8 Conrad now scolds RLDS “liberals” for either not seeing clearly or not confronting honestly the implications of the modifications they have made in their understanding of the Bible and Book of Mormon (and also of Joseph Smith), and hence also for not taking seriously their own scriptures, founding narratives, and traditions. See Conrad’s insightful essay entitled “Scripture in the Reorganization: Exegesis, Authority, and the ‘Prophetic Mantle’,” Dialogue, forthcoming.

9 In 1968 the RLDS faithful discovered how far changes had gone with the public disclosure of so-called “Position Papers,” written by RLDS “appointees” with the approval of the hierarchy, and then read to a group of lay people in over 96 hours of discussion by ten members of the RLDS Curriculum Consultation Committee. These papers were leaked by someone to RLDS conservatives, who published them without authorization, much to the annoyance of the “liberals.” Wayne Ham’s essay on the Book of Mormon formed part of these papers. See Position Papers (Independence, MO: Cumorah Books, 1968), 103-12. For a brief account of this episode, see Russell’s “Defenders of the Faith,” 14-16. Russell notes that “in the position paper on the Book of Mormon, the author [Wayne Ham] viewed the book as fiction and Joseph Smith as its author” (p. 15), and for a more detailed account, see William J. Knapp, “Professionalizing Religious Education in the Church: The ‘New Curriculum’ Controversy,” John Whitmer Historical Association Journal 2 (1982): 47-56.
The Book of Mormon as Fiction and Joseph Smith as Its Author

In his "Editor's Introduction" to Essays on Mormon Scripture, Dan Vogel declares that

all but one of the following fifteen essays . . . were written by Mormons from either the LDS or RLDS tradition. (The exception is Susan Curtis.) However, rather than being guided by institutional imperatives, each author has attempted to understand Mormon scripture on its own terms (p. viii).

His book examines what he calls the "human" element in the Mormon canon. What that seems to mean is that, among other things, he wants to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon is not what the faithful have always thought it to be—the word of God, and certainly not the restoration of a knowledge of ancient peoples with whom God had previously communicated. Hence we find in Essays on Mormon Scripture arguments to the effect that the Book of Mormon is not the word of God in the sense that it contains a genuine record of divine revelation, but that it is a human contrivance in which one might conceivably

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10 In an earlier book, Vogel relied upon RLDS "liberals" as well as some in the Latter-day Saint intellectual community who deny that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient history. He opined "that it may be possible to question the Book of Mormon's historicity and yet maintain a belief in its sacred and inspired nature," citing essays by Wayne Ham and William D. Russell to support this claim, as well as the opinions of Sterling M. McMurrin and George D. Smith. Vogel also complained that I have criticized those on the fringes of the Mormon community who "view the Book of Mormon as 'inspired fiction' and . . . [who] offer 'naturalistic explanations' for foundational events." He is correct in saying that I find such explanations coming from those with roots in the Mormon traditions merely a somewhat "'more sophisticated,' 'more subtle,' and 'more dangerous' threat to the faith than any previous attack by outsiders." Vogel charges that I have "failed to consider seriously the challenges facing the historicity of the Book of Mormon or the strengths of a less literalistic approach." It is not at all clear what "strengths" there might be in holding that the Book of Mormon is fiction fashioned by Joseph Smith. See Vogel, Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon: Religious Solutions from Columbus to Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 71 and 101 n. 1. For a detailed criticism of this book, see Kevin Christensen's review of it in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 2 (1990): 214-57.
find, if one were so disposed, some subjectively inspiring language.11

I will now examine the essays specifically on the Book of Mormon that Vogel included in Essays on Mormon Scripture:

1. Susan Curtis, the one author with no direct connection to what Vogel calls the "LDS or RLDS tradition" (p. viii), came from a Methodist background and was introduced to Mormon matters by her RLDS teachers at Graceland College. She is the only holder of a Ph.D. among the authors whose essays appear in Essays on Mormon Scripture. Her degree from Missouri is in history and she currently teaches at Purdue. While she was at Graceland, her most enthusiastic supporter was Russell, who seems to have been responsible for initially promoting her essay, which was originally circulated in 1977 while she was an undergraduate student.12

"The Book of Mormon," according to the concluding remark in Curtis's essay, "gives modern-day readers a glimpse at one aspect of the socio-intellectual context of the United States in the 1820s and 1830s" (p. 93). How does she arrive at that conclusion? Curtis begins with the assumption that the Book of Mormon is not an authentic ancient text, but merely nineteenth-century literature produced by Joseph Smith. She opines that "rather than an attempt to write the faithful history of an ancient

11 In order to accomplish that overall goal, Vogel has drawn upon essays by some writers with roots in the Latter-day Saint tradition, including George D. Smith, wealthy owner of Signature Books; Mark D. Thomas, who is employed in the banking industry; Anthony A. Hutchinson, an American foreign services officer who worked on a degree in New Testament at Catholic University; Lester E. Bush, a physician; Kevin L. Barney, an attorney; Melodie Moench Charles, a Denver resident with a degree from the Harvard Divinity School; Brent Metcalfe, who has not attended college; and Edward H. Ashment, who once studied Egyptology at Chicago.

12 Curtis's paper was originally a lecture given May 10, 1977, the year she graduated from Graceland College, in the Annual Restoration History Lecture Series sponsored by the John Whitmer Historical Association and Graceland. It was then circulated in manuscript as "Palmyra Revisited: A Look at Early 19th Century American Thought and the Book of Mormon" (Emerson, IA: by author, 1977), and published as "Palmyra Revisited: A Look at Early Nineteenth-Century America and the Book of Mormon," John Whitmer Historical Association Journal 2 (1982): 30-37; it is now called "Early Nineteenth-Century America and the Book of Mormon" (pp. 81-96).
community” (p. 87), Joseph Smith simply mirrored concerns found in his own environment.

Because the Book of Mormon is considered scripture by members of the Latter Day Saint faith and on the whole ignored by the rest of American society, it is seldom scrutinized as a piece of nineteenth century literature. Such an examination of the Book of Mormon within the literary, intellectual, and social context of the 1820s and 1830s helps illuminate Joseph Smith’s ‘jeremiad’ as a cultural artifact and adds a new dimension to our understanding of some Americans’ response to an emerging liberal order (p. 82).

According to Curtis, “the Book of Mormon reflected many of the concerns of the American society out of which it first emerged. For historians of the early national period it is evidence of the social, economic, political, and intellectual transformation of the early years of the republic. It is literature of and for its time” (p. 83). She feels that “the Book of Mormon offers modern-day readers one view of the values and ideas that prevailed in the early nineteenth century” (p. 82). Given that assumption, she then concluded in the 1982 version of her article that “the Book of Mormon is an affirmation of the liberal consensus and offers a warning of destruction to the faithless who abandon the American triad of democracy, capitalism, and Protestantism.”13 Her position in this regard has now been edited to read:

The Book of Mormon was one of many early nineteenth-century texts that addressed the anxiety arising from this dramatic reordering of American life. It offered advice and opinions on the proper American and Christian relationships to democratic practice, capitalist exchange, and Protestant ideology.14

14 In support of her view, Curtis now cites Hill’s Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), and Kenneth Winn, Exiles in a Land of Liberty (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 6-17. In the previously published version, she argued that the Book of Mormon defends the “individualism, democracy, and competitive market capitalism” that came on
Curtis sees the Book of Mormon as Smith's endorsement of "evangelical Protestantism with its mass gatherings and individualist conversions" (p. 87). Thus, for Curtis, "the Book of Mormon is Protestant in its orientation" (p. 89).

"Likewise, Smith wrote enthusiastically about market exchange in a society that theoretically predated the emergence of a capitalist ethos in the western world. Exemplary characters in Smith's Book of Mormon were fundamentally market capitalists engaged in commerce and seeking profits" (p. 87). Curtis reads the Book of Mormon as an endorsement of industrious, individualistic pursuit of gain and concludes that one can find implicit in it assumptions about hard work, regularity, commerce, and accumulation sustained by a Victorian sensibility. Getting individual 'gain' through industry and commodification drew Smith's praise. And like capitalists in the nineteenth-century, Smith's ancient Nephites found it necessary to establish a system of transportation, cities, and machines to support capitalism as it developed. The Nephites' industrial revolution, urban expansion, and improved transportation undergird their economic system that promised individual reward (pp. 87-88).

In the original version of her paper, Curtis set forth her approach: "although the Book of Mormon is believed to be of divine origin by some members of the Latter Day Saint faith [the RLDS; she ignores the LDS], it will be treated only as a piece of literature in this paper."

the scene "in the last decades of the eighteenth century and early years of the nineteenth century." See "Palmyra Revisited" (1982 version), 30. The other instances in which someone has added references in her essay to "authorities" involve the citation of Vogel's work. To buttress Curtis's opinion that, "as a piece of literature, the Book of Mormon [is] a creative attempt to uncover the origins of Indians on the North American continent" (p. 82), there is a citation to Vogel's Indian Origins, 93 n. 6, compare 96 n. 36, where it is claimed that Vogel's book provides "a good discussion of the Book of Mormon and the American Indians." Perhaps as a gesture of mutual admiration, in 1986 Vogel included the Curtis essay in the category of "other, less stilted, works" that have attempted to understand the Book of Mormon. See Indian Origins, 4, 75 n. 4, and compare 76 nn. 7-8 (all Curtis citations are found therein under the name Meintz).
It is possible to see exactly how Curtis reads passages in the Book of Mormon, or how she proof-texts to prove conclusions obviously reached independently of a careful reading of the text. For example, the claim that the Book of Mormon advocates Victorian mercantilism and profiteering overlooks its numerous condemnations of those who strive "to get gain" and its constant attribution of prosperity to the righteous blessing of God.

Curtis began a portion of her paper with the observation that initially it would seem that parties were the biggest problem [for Americans], but a new generation was maturing that could see worth in opposing views. The popularization of this generation's ideas would eventually lead to a legitimate permanent political opposition.15

After mentioning that George Washington worried about "irregular opposition" to "acknowledged authority," and "that Hamilton, Jefferson and other first generation political leaders never fully accepted the opposition party as a legitimate opposition," eventually some began to see that "the opposition of two ideas would enhance the quality of the compromise which the struggle would undoubtedly produce."16 Eventually, she claims, "fear that political strife might jeopardize the national existence was replaced by the mid-1820s by a feeling that open opposition could lead to better understanding of the issues and to growth from the subsequent give-and-take."17

With those remarks about political opposition in place, Curtis switched back to her reading of the Book of Mormon as a bit of frontier literature reflecting a nineteenth-century cultural ethos. Hence, she found in the Book of Mormon an endorsement of opposition political parties. "Nephi, one of the characters whose story is told in the Book of Mormon, declared early in his record that 'it must needs be that there is an opposition in all things.' The Book of Mormon, emerging in 1830, found an audience receptive to this concept, the first such

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
There is, of course, not a single word in the Book of Mormon that suggests that "opposition in all things" has anything to do with Joseph Smith's alleged attempt to express a growing nineteenth-century American fondness for factions or political parties. Curtis's speculation about the meaning of "opposition in all things" is a rather fanciful reading of this passage of scripture. By treating the Book of Mormon as nineteenth-century fiction, she leaves little place for the divine in it and is unable to find a coherent meaning in the book other than what she supposes was in Joseph Smith's environment.

If one wonders why an editor would choose to republish a partially refurbished paper written by a young student from a Methodist background who seems to know little about the text upon which she comments, it could well be that Curtis, equipped with a revisionist ideology by her teachers at Graceland College, advances something close to Vogel's own understanding of the Book of Mormon. The essays in Vogel's book that deal directly with the Book of Mormon have been around for some time, and hence the ideology they advance is not new and has long failed to explain the Book of Mormon or to gain many adherents.

2. A. Bruce Lindgren, an employee of the RLDS Temple School, distinguishes between seeing the Book of Mormon either as a sign (or symbol) that God revealed himself to Joseph Smith and seeing it as scripture, that is, as an authoritative source of beliefs about divine things. As a sign of the restoration, the Saints "use it to demonstrate the divine origin of

18 Ibid., 25. Incidentally, it was Lehi, and not Nephi, who made the statement Curtis quotes.
19 The Book of Mormon has played a less important role among the RLDS than among the LDS. For an amusing account of the last time the Book of Mormon was taught at Graceland College, which illustrates the degree of indifference to the Book of Mormon among liberal RLDS elements, see Russell, "History and Mormon Scriptures," 59-61. When Russell attempted to revive the teaching of the Book of Mormon, he readily admitted to his students that to that point he had not read it (p. 60).
20 Curtis's paper began circulation in 1977; Thomas's "Scholarship and the Book of Mormon" (pp. 63-79) was originally published in Sunstone 5/3 (May-June 1980): 24-29; Lindgren's "Sign or Scripture: Approaches to the Book of Mormon" (pp. 55-62), was originally published in Dialogue 19/1 (Spring 1986): 69-75; for earlier versions of Lancaster's "The Translation of the Book of Mormon" (pp. 97-112), see n. 1, above.
the RLDS/LDS movement or to demonstrate that Joseph Smith, Jr., was a prophet. It is not necessarily inappropriate,” according to Lindgren, “to use the Book of Mormon in this way, provided the claims can be substantiated” (p. 55). But can this be done? From Lindgren’s perspective, it is unfortunate that most discussions of the Book of Mormon typically “tend to focus on the question of its ancient historicity and authorship” (p. 55). He prefers to concentrate on the use of the Book of Mormon as scripture—as the source for what is believed—on the assumption that the book was “the creation of Joseph Smith” (p. 57). His reasons are negative; he does not, for example, believe that anyone has yet been able to develop an ancient American context with enough persuasiveness and richness of detail to contribute to our understanding of what the Book of Mormon is saying. To my knowledge, no one has ever been able to identify a significant correlation between Book of Mormon place names and personal names with ancient American place names and personal names. Similarly, I am unaware of a widely accepted chronology of an ancient American civilization which correlates with the chronology of the Book of Mormon. In themselves, these factors do not ‘disprove’ the Book of Mormon; they simply make it difficult to interpret it from an ancient American context.” (pp. 56-57)

Earlier, with Peter A. Judd, Lindgren argued that the Book of Mormon has always been “the subject of much speculation, attack, and subsequent defense. It was presented by the early Saints as a history of people living on the American continent...[and] was affirmed as a translation from gold plates.”21 Lindgren notes that “very little is known about the precise way in which Joseph Smith produced the book. He did not possess language skills that would have enabled him to translate an ancient language into modern English. It is known that he dictated the manuscript to scribes.”22 Lindgren holds that the Saints have “pursued two courses” in response to criticisms of the Book of Mormon. First, they “have attempted to authenticate

21 Peter A. Judd and A. Bruce Lindgren, An Introduction to the Saints Church (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1976), 83.
22 Ibid., 84.
the book by proving, through archaeological research, that the people described in the Book of Mormon did, indeed, inhabit the American continent." Second, they have "let the book speak for itself." This formulation seems close to the distinction that Lindgren now makes between seeing the book as either a sign or as scripture. The first approach leads to focusing on what he calls "questions of . . . historicity and authorship," which he rejects because he finds that approach unproductive.

In 1976, Lindgren acknowledged that "the Book of Mormon was the primary missionary tool of the infant church," but then claims that "from the early years of the [RLDS] church up to the present day there have been a number of different ways in which Latter Day Saints view the Book of Mormon." The Book of Mormon has been viewed by the RLDS either (1) "as evidence that God reveals himself in all ages and that the written response to that revelation is important enough to be given the status of Scripture," or (2) "as an additional witness to Jesus Christ," or (3) "as supplementing the Bible's collection of testimony relating to God's acting in the lives of his people," or (4) "as an authentic ancient history." "Individual [RLDS] members," according to Lindgren, "may consider all, some or none of these views to reflect their personal understanding of the Book of Mormon." Lindgren sees these as possible alternative approaches that may be considered, presumably along with rejecting the book, as individual RLDS members "form their own opinions about its value." The RLDS seem to have a somewhat less well-developed sense of the role and importance of the Book of Mormon, which may help explain the recent efforts of the "liberal" establishment to find ways of downplaying or rejecting it as history (and also as a source for the content of faith), while perhaps retaining it as scripture, in part because it is an artifact of the restoration.

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 86-87.
26 Ibid., 87. This view is rather unlike that held by Latter-day Saints, who typically understand the Book of Mormon as an authentic ancient history, which is also at the same time an additional witness to Jesus Christ that supplements the biblical witness as it provides evidence that God has moved to restore his covenant with his people. Each of these aspects is seen as logically dependent on the other, with no one of them somehow able to stand alone.
27 Ibid., 88.
Lindgren claims that “any responsible study of scripture should first establish the text, preferably in the original language, and the political, social and cultural context out of which the scripture arose. Even so basic an issue,” he affirms, “is unresolved with respect to the Book of Mormon. Is it an actual account of the peoples whose story it tells?” (p. 56). Or “is the Book of Mormon the creation of Joseph Smith? If so we can establish the text in its original language, and we can know a great deal about the conditions which prevailed when it was written, but,” asks Lindgren, “why then should it be accepted as scripture?” (p. 57). He does not answer that question, granting instead that such an approach has the disadvantage “that most church members do not believe that Joseph Smith composed the Book of Mormon” (p. 57). This leads to a dilemma. He grants that a solution to it must be found. He simply ignores all of the vast literature in which the Book of Mormon is read as an ancient text while still probing for reasons to support this belief.

From Lindgren’s perspective, the Book of Mormon has become “more an object of faith rather than a source of faith” (p. 59), and hence the Saints “have tended to use the Book of Mormon as a sign and not as a scripture” (p. 59). He insists that its “scriptural status does not rest upon questions of historicity” (p. 60). For him, “writings are scriptural because the church holds them as normative or authoritative” (p. 60), but he also asks, if the Book of Mormon is not an authentic ancient text, “why then should it be accepted as scripture?” (p. 57). To put the question another way, why should the Book of Mormon be held by the church as “normative and authoritative,” if there never was a Lehi colony and if Joseph Smith simply made up both the book and the story of its coming forth? Lindgren does not answer this question, and yet he senses that it is crucial, for “the story of its coming forth,” he grants, “cannot be separated from the story of the restoration of the church.” He correctly holds that “the most significant threat to the Book of Mormon is not questions of its historicity. The most significant threat is that it will be ignored by the faithful” as a source of the content of faith (p. 61), for “questions concerning its origin and authorship, although important in the process of interpretation, are secondary” (p. 60). The question he neglects to confront is why one ought to turn to the Book of Mormon for the content of faith, for prophetic teachings, if it is not what it claims to be, including among other things an authentic ancient history.
Hence, instead of dealing with the crucial issues which he has raised, Lindgren insists that his “concern is with interpreting the Book of Mormon” (p. 57), that is, with figuring out what it actually teaches. He thinks that such an enterprise will have to go on “regardless of our sympathies” on the question of the historicity of the book (p. 57). But he does not sense that the interpretive enterprise will be fundamentally different depending on how one judges the question of historicity. After attempting to describe portions of the message contained in the Book of Mormon, Lindgren confesses that he expects that “we will find ourselves arguing with the book’s answers much of the time” (p. 61) because what is taught in it runs directly counter to what many of the Saints would like to believe. For Lindgren, the Book of Mormon teaches that “Godhood is hardly within our reach. We are depraved, and our depravity does not result from our willfulness alone. It comes from the structure of human existence itself. We are, through no fault of our own, in the midst of a cycle in which our righteousness will lead to prosperity and pride, and eventually to sin. What then,” he asks, “do we do with eternal progression?” (p. 58).

Lindgren is disturbed because he finds that “the Book of Mormon is pessimistic about human nature” (p. 57).28 He finds that, “according to the Book of Mormon, we are not on a progressive journey to righteousness and perfection” (p. 57). Because of or in spite of the constant emphasis on the atonement of Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon, he finds its message “pessimistic,” for there is no necessary historical progress taught in the book. “The golden age of the Nephites, for example, leads not to glory but to destruction. If the Book of Mormon is a story of the conflict between good and evil, it is disturbing to note that

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28 Lindgren cites, as evidence for this assertion, his essay entitled “Sin and Redemption in the Book of Mormon,” in Maurice L. Draper and A. Bruce Lindgren, eds., Restoration Studies II, 201-6. In this essay Lindgren correctly notes that the Book of Mormon links prosperity with righteousness, with keeping the commandments. He is perplexed by such a teaching. He holds that “this understanding ... is at odds with the view of human nature so widely held in the Latter Day Saint churches. Saints are,” he claims, “generally optimistic about human nature. They like to believe that human beings are essentially good and that they have great potential if they will merely apply themselves” (ibid., 202). It does not appear to occur to Lindgren that part of the importance of the Book of Mormon may lie in its teaching the Saints things that they do not necessarily want to hear.
evil wins twice” (p. 57). A better story would be of an inevitable moral progress grounded in confidence in human goodness that would render unnecessary a redemption through the atonement of Jesus Christ. But Lindgren ignores many optimistic passages regarding the glorious salvation of the righteous, and he is not entirely consistent, for he also believes that faith is not assent to a set of dogmas—which, it seems, would include notions of historical progress or essential goodness of man—but “is [optimistically] grounded in the experience of being saved or redeemed by God through Jesus Christ” (p. 60).

Lindgren feels that what he calls “the moral pessimism of the Book of Mormon is in keeping with the puritan Calvinism of New England, but it stands in sharp contrast to the religion of moral progress which was sweeping the American frontier in the early nineteenth century.” Hence it runs counter to the “pioneer spirit” of Mormon Americans, who are busy “perfecting themselves in the world,” and hence “they failed to see that prosperity might also bring pride and sin” (ibid., 203). Lindgren is concerned because “the view of human nature in the Book of Mormon is not progressive; it is cyclical. Righteousness in the present does not imply greater righteousness in the future.” Instead, the teachings of the Book of Mormon are “pessimistic” (ibid.). Thus, Lindgren finds it “disturbing to consider that people may continue to do evil after” having a knowledge of divine things through special revelations (ibid., 203). Running counter to the moral optimism of American liberal religiosity, the Book of Mormon contains offensive teachings—that “we stand in need of redemption. It is at this point where we must ask serious questions about the Book of Mormon. How does Jesus Christ redeem us from sin? Is the Jesus Christ of the Book of Mormon able to rescue us from the drastic predicament in which we are placed?” Lindgren thinks that “the answer is, finally, no. Good and evil wage war on each other [in the Book of Mormon]. In the end, evil wins twice” (ibid., 204). The reason that he gives for this opinion is that there is no account of historical progress in the Book of Mormon, hence “the atonement is strikingly limited,” the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is, for Lindgren, limited because he is only able to rescue us from death and, on condition of faith and repentance, from sin, thereby making it possible for us to return to the presence of God. But that presumably is not the kind of optimistic teaching we desire. What the Saints should and do often want, from Lindgren’s perspective, is a moral optimism that sees no need for a redemption from sin by the atonement of Jesus Christ; they want to believe, instead, that they are essentially good and also necessarily moving inexorably forward on their own moral worth, powers, and merits.

After suggesting the possibility that language in the Book of Mormon concerning the unity of Jesus and God may not be trinitarian, that such language may merely be a “way of saying that Jesus Christ is divine”
In order to get an indication of how an outspoken and highly influential RLDS "liberal" understands the Book of Mormon, one rather less moderate than Lindgren, it is useful to examine what an English journalist by the name of Malise Ruthven, who has had a look at what he considered the exotic manifestations of religion in America, describes as an interview with "Paul Edwards, principal [actually president] of the Temple School, [who] is widely regarded as the RLDS Church's leading intellectual."31 Ruthven claims to have asked Edwards about the "part the Book of Mormon played in the teachings of the Reorganized Church." Edwards is reported to have said that his "guess would be that it constitutes less than ten per cent of our scriptural readings. We don't teach it in our schools. Our people believe in it, but they don't believe it. It's important as a symbol." For Edwards, the Book of Mormon is something the RLDS are simply forced to live with, since it is part of the tradition. "It's a story, a myth, who knows what? For most people I know it's got nothing to do with anything," according to Edwards. "It's the way we explain ourselves. But whenever possible, I avoid bringing it up. If somebody else brings it up I squirm. If somebody wants to know what I think I usually lie." At this point Ruthven wanted to know why, given his view of the Book of Mormon and the traditional foundations of Mormon faith, Edwards remains RLDS. "The Church," Edwards said, "has some social and I think, in a very small sense, some religious meaning, and I don't want to see it destroyed. I'm a

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(p. 58), Lindgren finds it "most striking" that such language "is so much in conflict with the trinitarianism of the RLDS church and with the pluralism of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Somehow the two churches have developed separate and opposing views of God, both of which apparently conflict with the idea of God presented in the Book of Mormon" (p. 59). Apparently without sensing that the radically conflicting views concerning God that are currently held by the LDS and RLDS have much to do with the background assumptions brought to the interpretive task, Lindgren, following a recent fad among Mormon historians, insists that the Book of Mormon contains a "rather classical" version of the "doctrine of the trinity" (p. 58), which turns out to be "a type of modalistic Monarchianism" or "Sabellianism," citing Vogel's "The Earliest Mormon Concept of God," in Gary James Bergera, ed., Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 17-33.

member of the Church despite the Book of Mormon, not because of it. I don’t think that’s an unusual position for people in the RLDS [Church], but it’s totally unacceptable to announce it.”

Edwards, it should be noted, has elsewhere argued that the Book of Mormon is simply “Joseph Smith’s speculative work that gives the story of his experience,” which Edwards understands as essentially mystical. He therefore pictures Joseph Smith as both “mystic and technician. . . . He sought to present his teachings within the bounds of ancient scripture, often reworking the old text to fit his new conceptions. He also gathered his own teaching into the Book of Mormon, a speculative work that gives the story of his experience, and the truths he arrived at from considering the experience.”

Lindgren certainly echoes these views.

3. Mark D. Thomas (pp. 63-79), a banker in Washington State, covers somewhat the same ground as Lindgren. “Certainly the Book of Mormon,” according to Thomas, “does not appear on the surface to be in the tradition of nineteenth century literature” (p. 67). Instead, it presents itself as an authentic ancient history. Why reject that view? Thomas distinguishes three (or perhaps four) approaches to understanding the Book of Mormon. The first he calls “historical.” “Once we establish the text to be interpreted, the next step is to reach a historical understanding of the text.” The reason why such an understanding is necessary, is that “every

32 Ibid., 96-97.
34 Thomas begins with some extravagant remarks about the necessity of textual criticism, claiming that “before we can ever think of interpreting a work, we must first establish the best possible text” (p. 64). On this issue, he is wrong, for in the absence of textual criticism it is still possible to begin to read and understand whatever text we have before us. For the most part textual criticism merely fine-tunes the text and is useful in the clarification of small points of interpretation. And it is not clear what would constitute the “best possible text” when dealing with the Book of Mormon.
text can to a greater or lesser degree be better understood with a knowledge of the original historical language, setting, and author” (p. 66). This may be true, but, as Thomas recognizes, when we turn to the Book of Mormon we are faced with a serious problem, for “there is no consensus as to when the Book of Mormon was actually written” (p. 66). The book claims to be a translation of an ancient text, while critics of the book insist that it must be read as purely nineteenth-century literature composed by Joseph Smith. If it is the case, as Thomas seems to indicate, that one cannot really begin to understand the Book of Mormon without taking sides on the question of by whom and when it was originally composed, which alternative does he favor? The reader is forced to make a choice between those alternatives, and certainly that choice will determine how the book is interpreted and understood.

Much like Lindgren, Thomas notes that “almost all historical investigations into the book have been apologetic—that is, defending either the ancient or modern origins of the book” (p. 66). He interprets the Book of Mormon on the assumption that it is a modern and not an authentically ancient text, and he thereby becomes an apologist for such a stance. Hence, for him, as for Curtis and Lindgren, the Book of Mormon is nineteenth-century fiction and Joseph Smith was its original author, and not merely a “translator.” Like Lindgren, Thomas indicates that he does “not believe that the approach from American archeology will provide significant results for two reasons: first, because of lack of material.” He therefore asserts that “no archaeologist has been able to locate a single Nephite text or city.”

35 Though the essay was originally published in 1980 and, hence, Thomas can be excused for not knowing of John L. Sorenson’s work—which, however, was already widely available in unofficial circulation—in this version of his essay no attempt has been made by either the author or editor to update the essay, other than to insert in the notes a reference to Vogel’s essay entitled “The Earliest Mormon Concept of God,” in Bergera, ed., Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine, 17-33 (see p. 77 n. 5); a reference to Vogel’s Indian Origins, 60-61 (see p. 77 n. 8); and a reference to Vogel’s Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988); and to Hill’s Quest for Refuge (see p. 78 n. 14). Though Thomas makes a big fuss about the necessity for critical texts and for textual criticism, no effort is made to direct the reader’s attention to the attempt by Robert F. Smith to fashion the beginnings of a critical text of the Book of Mormon (which is currently available through F.A.R.M.S.), or to Sorenson’s An American Setting for the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake
reason is that "much of the material used to show Nephite or Lamanite influence in ancient America was available to Joseph Smith," hence what Thomas calls "this geographical approach to the Book of Mormon provides no interpretive aids and only weak apologetic material."

Unlike Lindgren, Thomas identifies what he calls "the Near Eastern approach," which is also broadly historical. This approach, he thinks, "recognizes the difficulty with Nephite archeology and attempts to place the Nephite scripture in its old world setting. It has been used for both interpretive and apologetic purposes" (p. 67), though he does not examine the literature in which this approach has been developed. Instead, he claims that Mormons have liked the so-called "Near Eastern approach" because they wanted a book that would both support and interpret the Bible. Hence, "many of those who believe that the Book of Mormon is modern will want to reduce the Near Eastern approach to a biblical approach." To counter such a move, "Mormon scholars have sought Near Eastern elements in the Book of Mormon which cannot be traced to the Bible in order to prove that the Book of Mormon is ancient. But I believe," Thomas then opines, that "the important interpretive aids must be sought through the Bible itself" (p. 69). He discounts without argument the various efforts to set out elements in the Book of Mormon that appear to be genuinely ancient and that could not have been drawn from Joseph Smith's environment by a master forger.

"Non-Mormons have been exploring the nineteenth-century roots of the Book of Mormon since its publication," but, according to Thomas, they have done little to advance the interpretation of the text. He claims that by seeing the Book of Mormon as nineteenth-century fiction that draws upon biblical
materials and attempts to confront theological issues in Joseph Smith's immediate environment, it will be possible to make a significant advance in understanding it. "We are," he claims, "entering the beginning of an era of interpretative historical criticism in Book of Mormon research. This approach will examine all of these inherited [nineteenth-century] sources and demonstrate how the Book of Mormon shapes them for its own purpose" (p. 74). He neglects to consider the possibility that the best interpretative historical criticism may take seriously both the possibility that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text and will also draw upon Near Eastern sources as well as American archaeology where appropriate. Thomas strives to show how seeing the book as Joseph Smith's attempt to confront pressing theological issues (pp. 70-74), coupled with something he calls literary criticism, will facilitate reading the Book of Mormon as nineteenth-century theology. What he eventually labels "literary-historical interpretation . . . will lay the foundation for the broad theological approach" (p. 76) he has described. He hopes that the old apologetic approach defending the Book of Mormon as authentic history will be replaced by what he calls an interpretative approach, which turns out to be a new apologetic bent on finding the meaning of the Book of Mormon in such things as nineteenth-century revival language. Such an approach, he feels, will have the "power to mold and modify faith" and thereby supposedly produce "a purer faith and a nobler Mormonism" in which "the scholar's word will be one of those guiding the church's future" (p. 76). Thomas's predictions and ambitions seem quite unlikely and unreal.

37 In 1983, in an essay entitled "Revival Language in the Book of Mormon," Sunstone 8/3 May-June 1983): 19-25, at 19, Thomas ventured his own full-scale "literary-historical interpretation" of the Book of Mormon grounded on the assumption that it is nineteenth-century fiction. "While magical traditions had some influence on Joseph Smith, I believe," he wrote in 1983, "that a more useful and accurate explanation of the Prophet and the early Church comes from understanding his relationship to revivalism: from revivalism to revelation. This perspective can lead us to a powerful new tool for interpreting the Book of Mormon." His effort should be contrasted with the essays recently assembled in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., Rediscovering the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1991), or in a number of other studies recently published by F.A.R.M.S.
The Negative Miracle

In reading *Essays on Mormon Scripture*, I am reminded of what Jacob Neusner calls the negative miracle of some religious studies. In 1977, Neusner, distinguished student of “the classics of the Judaic tradition,” or “Judaism in late antiquity, or Judaism in modern times, or American Judaism,” argued that some religious studies specialists “have succeeded in performing a negative miracle” by taking a “subject, rich in life,” and making it dull by turning it “into a technology.” That “negative miracle” has been accomplished in order to rid the study of religion “of the empty-headed preachers, pastors, and rabbis, and by making a place for people who could teach with a measure of detachment and objectivity.” Neusner insists that those who study religion “are answerable to two juries, the one composed of the subjects we teach, the other, of our students. Yet we hear only the voice of the preferred judges, our colleagues. In the end, the subject will go forward, and the students will bury us, hopefully, with a kaddish, not a curse.” For Neusner, “it is time to ask whether we who have prevailed have perceived the beam in our eye, having pronounced that those of so many others bear motes.” He finds that some who study religion ignore the fact that religion is alive outside the study.

I think this is so because among our colleagues are some who do not really like religion in its living forms, but find terribly interesting religion in its dead ones. That is why an old Christian text, one from the first century, for example, is deemed a worthy subject of scholarship. But a fresh Christian expression (I think in this connection of the *Book of Mormon*) is available principally for ridicule, but never for study. Religious experience in the third century is

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fascinating. Religious experience in the twentieth century is frightening or absurd. 39

Is there a parallel between what Neusner describes and some of what is taking place in Vogel’s book? The answer, in part, is yes: something like what Neusner describes is at work among both the deracinated on the fringes of the Church as also among those “liberals” who have recently gained power over the RLDS—and some of whose essays, as we have seen, are now found in Essays on Mormon Scripture. (One important difference between the authors included in Vogel’s book and the scholars about whom Neusner complained is that virtually none of Vogel’s associates has managed to hold permanent positions in academia, Mormon or otherwise.)

Something of both the perspective and quality of the contents of Essays on Mormon Scripture, especially on the Book of Mormon, has already been indicated. One of the other previously unpublished essays was written by Vogel and Brent Metcalfe (pp. 187-219). The other original essays in this volume are the work of Edward H. Ashment, known for his dispute with Hugh Nibley (see pp. 221-35). Ashment concludes his speculations about how the Saints ought to abandon the belief that the book of Abraham, book of Moses, and Book of Mormon are restorations of ancient texts, and thereby avoid making those texts “an object of ridicule by unnecessarily archaising” them (p. 231), with some proof-texting of the passage quoted from Jacob Neusner. 40 Ashment has Neusner hold that

39 Ibid., for this and preceding quotations. Neusner also notes that some students of religion devote their energies to the study of religious texts “without for a moment raising their eyes to see, outside their very windows, people who study those same texts but who also believe and in life interpret them as well” (p. 119). For Neusner, “we have moved too far toward the pretense that there is a science of religions, even adopting the jargon and obfuscation of pseudo-sciences. We have forgotten the thing we study” (p. 119).

40 Ashment turns Neusner into a “biblical scholar,” which is only a part of how Neusner views himself. In addition, while Ashment is disdainful of Hugh Nibley, Neusner refers to his own “esteem and respect” for Nibley, whom he describes as “a scholar of religion who, when he receives his audience, will be seen as one of the fecund intellects of the study of religion in our century.” See Neusner’s “Why No New Judaisms in the Twentieth Century?” in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley, 2 vols. (Salt Lake
an old Christian text, one from the first century, for example, is deemed a worthy subject of scholarship [by historians of religion]. But a fresh Christian expression (I think in this connection of the Book of Mormon) is available principally for ridicule, but never for study. Religious experience in the third century is fascinating. Religious experience in the twentieth century [or the nineteenth] is frightening or absurd. (p. 230)

Ashment simply misreads Neusner's statement, and in so doing he also seems to have failed to follow his own laudable rule about reading texts as far as possible in context (pp. 230-31). Why? Neusner seems to have provided the answer, which applies with equal force to the essays by Curtis, Lindgren, and Thomas (which have already been examined) when he complained about those who have a detached interest in religion. Such writers fail to take seriously the texts that fascinate them because they were “raised in religious settings, mastered the tradition but gave up the faith, and, balancing their diverse ambivalences, chose the study of religions as a satisfying way of serving as a religious authority without bearing religious responsibilities.” Ashment’s use of Neusner’s essay turns out to be symptomatic of much of the work reprinted in *Essays on Mormon Scripture*, and it may be an indication of what Vogel has in mind when he describes the contents of his book as not having been “guided by institutional imperatives” (p. viii).

**Dissonance over Faith and Historicity**

Ashment’s arguments against the historical authenticity of the book of Abraham are not new. Virtually all of the technical arguments advanced by Ashment in his attack on Nibley’s views on the historicity of the book of Abraham appear to have been anticipated by H. Michael Marquardt, an inveterate anti-Mormon publicist.41 Ashment has added to the kinds of arguments

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41 See H. Michael Marquardt, *The Book of Abraham Papyrus Found: An Answer to Dr. Hugh Nibley’s Book “The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment” as It Relates to the Source of the*
advancing by Marquardt some speculation about dissonance management that he has taken from Robert P. Carroll’s work on prophecy in the Bible. However, Carroll is simply not making the point that Ashment is attempting to make, but is, instead, concerned with figuring out how peoples, within the biblical narrative, seem to have dealt with what may have appeared to them to be failures of prophecy, and hence he is concerned with the beginnings of the interpretation of sacred texts within those texts themselves. Ashment makes Carroll’s talk about dissonance and bolstering and so forth serve quite a different purpose; he adopts from Carroll the terminology of the well-known social-psychological theory of cognitive dissonance in an effort to buttress his argument against the historicity of the book of Abraham (and the Book of Mormon).

But there is an irony in Ashment’s having done that, for what he may not sense is his own dissonance management in his struggle against the book of Abraham and Book of Mormon. He seems troubled by the kinds of arguments presented by Nibley, and with his own revisionist orthodoxy threatened, he seems to have fashioned his own mode of dissonance management. He seems to manage his own discomfort by scorning the arguments and evidences Nibley has assembled that show parallels in the literature of the ancient world with the contents of the book of Abraham. Ashment engages in what might be called “bolstering” as he brushes that evidence aside (see pp. 229-31, 251), alluding, instead, to the “apparent antipathy against scholarship” (p. 230) that he attributes to Nibley.

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Book of Abraham, introduction by Dee Jay Nelson (Sandy, UT: Printed and Published by the Author, 1975).

To support himself, Ashment again misreads a text. Ashment is annoyed by Nibley’s claim that “the only ‘really effective means of testing any method [is] by the results that it produces’” (p. 230).43 Nibley argues that Joseph Smith foreclosed a direct examination of how he was able to produce the book of Abraham by claiming that it was done by divine revelation. There is no way of probing directly the processes of revelation. Instead, according to Nibley, Joseph Smith places the whole thing beyond any direct examination and criticism, but leaves wide open the really effective means of testing any method, which is by the results it produces. The results in this case are a formidable corpus of purportedly ancient records which can be tested as such.

Nibley appeals to the abundance of old texts purportedly relating to Abraham that can be compared with the book of Abraham. “Yet to this day,” according to Nibley, “the critics insist on confining their efforts strictly to an expose of Joseph Smith’s method, while avoiding any discussion of the results with almost hysterical touchiness.”44 Ashment charges that Nibley adopts “a Machiavellian approach” (p. 230), whatever that is, by looking at the results rather than directly at method. It is not clear what Machiavelli has to do with any of this, for Nibley merely compares what Joseph Smith actually produced, however it was that he was able to do it, with what can be turned up in the ancient world about Abraham. He finds a store of ancient lore similar to the book of Abraham. And it is not easy to explain how Joseph Smith could have accomplished such a feat without divine assistance. Ashment claims that his own speculation about the so-called Kirtland Egyptian papers leads to the conclusion that Joseph Smith could not and hence did not translate Egyptian.

Writers like Ashment (and Marquardt, Richard P. Howard,45

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43 Ashment is here quoting Nibley’s The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 53.
44 Ibid.
and Dee Jay Nelson) seem to have ignored the results—the actual contents of the book of Abraham—by not asking whether anything in that text matches what can be found in the literature from portions of the ancient world. As Ashment’s essay shows, Nibley is right about results being the proper test of a method, and he is also right about the touchiness of the critics of Joseph Smith.

Like many of the authors whose essays appear in Essays on Mormon Scripture, Ashment strives to distinguish truth from historicity in an effort to warrant the rejection of the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon, as well as the books of Abraham and Moses. To accomplish this feat he must assume that faith does not have historical contents—for instance, faith must not have as condition or object an unequivocal resurrection of Jesus who also really appeared to his immediate disciples or later to the Nephites and eventually to Joseph Smith—and hence ultimately faith has neither objects nor grounding.

The missing link for such an argument is provided by RLDS Church Historian Richard P. Howard’s insistence that revelation is thoroughly non-propositional.46 Borrowing

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46 A few Latter-day Saint writers influenced by strains of Protestant liberalism have also shown a fascination with the notion that revelation is non-propositional. For example, prophets, from Hutchinson’s perspective, generate “myths” out of their “imaginations,” which he also describes as “the casting of theology in story form” (see Anthony Hutchinson, “A Mormon Midrash? LDS Creation Narrative Reconsidered,” Dialogue 21/4 [Winter 1988]: 11-74, at 16). He then explains that myth so understood “is a positive, helpful term” that “biblical theologians use to better understand how stories mold our hearts and move us in ways not possible by mere propositional teaching” (p. 17). Hutchinson had earlier been attracted to the notion that prophets are merely mystics and hence that revelation is entirely non-propositional. Now he seems to have backed away somewhat from that extreme, indefensible view—a view that can be found in the version of his paper cited by Ashment (see pp. 257 n. 23, 258 nn. 20, 29-30, 32, for citations to Hutchinson’s “A Mormon Midrash; LDS Creation Narratives in Redaction-Critical Perspective,” a paper originally read at the Mormon History Association meetings in Omaha in May 1983). In the published version of this paper Hutchinson admits, though reluctantly, that there must be at least some propositional component in divine revelation which stands at the very heart of the Christian message, partly because there can be no real faith without propositional content that links faith to reality,
categories from Liberal Protestant theology, Howard claims that the idea that divine revelation to prophets involves, provides, or includes information—propositions that are simply or unequivocally true—about divine things (that there is a God who sent his son to earth to offer a last great sacrifice for sin, that Jesus of Nazareth did and said certain things, suffered for sin, was killed and then later was resurrected, and so forth) is a false notion of revelation because it implies the dreaded mistakes of holding that the Bible is inerrant and prophets infallible.47

presumably because faith needs content or it becomes mere sentimentality or emotional froth, or one has adopted a consistent mysticism in which the “knower” must remain silent because whatever is known is essentially ineffable. Hence he now holds that “the power of a myth about redemption through Christ crucified and resurrected . . . seems directly dependent on whether Jesus in fact died and then bodily reappeared to his disciples. Similarly, one may recognize a non- or supra-propositional truth in religious claims and discourse without lapsing into an irreligious positivism or some kind of sentimental theological liberalism emptied of all propositional content” (p. 17 n. 3). Vogel points out that “neither the authors nor the editor [of Essays on Mormon Scripture] necessarily agree with the views and conclusions reached in all of the essays.” How ought one to understand the “sentimental theological liberalism” pushed by RLDS writers like Howard, Spencer, and Russell? When it comes to certain crucial issues, Hutchinson also seems tainted by what he identifies as theological liberalism, since he denies that Mormon faith has anything to do with whether Joseph Smith was visited by angels or whether the Book of Mormon is true; his propositional content of faith is restricted to some statements about Jesus. And yet he still advances a theory of revelation which removes a genuine propositional component from his notion of what constitutes divine revelation, at least as revelation is believed by the Saints to have a distinctive Mormon element such as might be associated with the Book of Mormon. See Hutchinson, “The Word of God Is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-Century Fiction,” transcript made and circulated by Alan Goff of Hutchinson’s 1987 Washington Sunstone Symposium paper, May 15-16, 1987.

47 See 5, 7, 13, 15 for Howard’s use of such labels. Lancaster advances an ideology similar to that of Howard and concludes that “the inspiration [Joseph] Smith received involved general concepts rather than literal information” (p. 108). Where that speculation leads can be seen in the essays by Spencer and Russell, who employ liberal Protestant slogans (pp. 19-22, 26, 43, 46-9, 51) which are also found in Ashment’s concluding essay. For instances of the use of these slogans, see the following: inerrancy (pp. 5, 7, 13, 254, 255) or infallibility, and fundamentalism (pp. 48, 51, 188, 248, 251, 254-55). These slogans assist the effort to advance in a
Howard also argues that Joseph Smith was devoted to a "propositional revelation doctrine" (5) and that he was also deeply confused about the matter, since some theologians have preferred to describe what they understand by the word "revelation" as an "encounter" with the divine that does not yield propositions. By propositional revelation Howard says that he means the "divine revealing of certain knowledge or information about God and his church, usually in the form of propositions or

Mormon context an essentially liberal Protestant reading of scripture. When such theories are applied to texts like the Book of Mormon, the historical authenticity of those texts is compromised. An additional instance of slogan-thinking found in Essays on Mormon Scripture is the constant complaint against literal interpretations of scripture (pp. 19, 20, 21, 22, 31, 43, 47, 48, 49, 52, 56, 74, 159, 188, 212). Vogel, for example, after telling his readers what the Hebrew for firmament "literally" means, asserts that such "insights, however, have been challenged by biblical literalists not because such views challenge biblical inspiration but rather because they challenge fundamentalist preconceptions about the nature of revelation. Literalists not only hold the notion of verbal inspiration but also assume that for revelation to be true, it must contain unique and new concepts which transcend time and space—any environmental dependency would be proof of human origin" (pp. 188-89). But notice that in order to make the point, Vogel has to insist on what a word (and hence a passage) "means literally." Does this mean that those whom Vogel labels "literalists" are not interested in the "literal" meaning of the language they find in the Bible? Then why call them literalists? It appears that whenever "non-literalists" want to make a point, they begin talking about the literal meaning of the scriptures. See, for example, Hutchinson (p. 159), for an illustration of the point. This suggests that there is considerable equivocation taking place in the use of the term "literal." Though revisionists sometimes like to quote James Barr when it serves their purposes (see Ashment, pp. 254-55, 256 n. 6, 262 nn. 58 and 60, 264 n. 79 and 83), they neglect his subtle treatment of the problems posed by appeals to literal and non-literal meaning. See, for example, James Barr, "Literality," Faith and Philosophy 6/4 (October 1989): 412-27. There is simply no way one can avoid the literal meaning of a text, and no way that meaning may not at times be highly symbolic or metaphorical. Sorting out such matters is very difficult, however, and much depends upon the care and skill with which it is done. Hence, what Barr shows, among other things, is the wholesale confusion among those who talk about literal and non-literal meaning. One should expect such confusion when a political debate is taking place, as is clearly the case with Russell's essay (pp. 43-54), which carries the title "Beyond Literalism," though he neglects to sort out what that label might possibly mean in a Mormon context.
doctrines” (1). It is not exactly clear what he means by “encounter,” nor is it clear why such “encounters” with the divine could not yield true propositions, unless those “encounters” are entirely mystical.

Howard’s main objection to Joseph Smith’s understanding of revelation is that he either changed or authorized changes in the texts that report those revelations. But it is not entirely clear exactly what point Howard is attempting to make by drawing attention to the well-known fact that a few (mostly grammatical) changes were made in the published editions of the Book of Mormon and Book of Commandments. Why that matter is related to the question of propositional revelation is rather opaque.

How does Ashment deal with exegetes and historians who see things differently than he does? Much like current RLDS “theologians,” he is critical of the traditional position of Latter-day Saints because he sees it as, among other things, a manifestation of “a lack of scholarship.” And “this lack of scholarship becomes especially apparent when LDS authors can appeal only to post-exilic, early Christian, or medieval stories about Adam, Enoch, Abraham, or Moses in their efforts to prove the historicity of the non-biblical portions of the ‘Selections from the Book of Moses’ or the Book of Abraham” (p. 251). In stating it this way he avoids confronting the central issue raised by the parallels between an old literature about Abraham and the book of Abraham. And he may also be begging the question in the way he manipulates the term “scholarship” by charging that the views of those with whom he

48 Some who draw upon Howard’s essay are not always clear about his arguments, being unaware that he is talking about the mode of revelation. For example, according to Bill Russell, Howard and others suggest that “the object of Christian faith is not assent to propositions, but Christian discipleship.” See Russell, “A Further Inquiry into the Historicity of the Book of Mormon,” 26, and 27 n. 46, or “The Historicity of the Book of Mormon,” in Restoration Studies II, 198, 200 n. 24, where he cites Howard’s essay now reprinted in Essays on Mormon Scripture. Of course, if one is attempting to get clear on the meaning of faith, as that term is used in the scriptures, then it is proper to say that the word ultimately identifies trust, specifically trust in God, and not mere assent to some propositions. But it would not be possible to trust God, if there were no such being. And we would have no reason for such trust if certain propositions about God were not true, for example, that he loves us and sent his son to atone for our sins, and so forth, all of which involve propositions.
disagrees manifest a "lack of scholarship." Since it might be thought perverse to claim that the texts Nibley draws upon for parallels in his studies of the book of Abraham (and the Book of Mormon or the book of Moses) are simply not relevant to the question of their historical authenticity, Ashment's point might be that such parallels as can be shown to exist between, for example, the book of Abraham and an old literature virtually unknown in Joseph Smith's day, though they seem to provide support for the historical authenticity of the texts Joseph Smith gave us, are not sufficiently ancient to provide what might be called a final historical "proof." But hardly anyone, including Nibley, would deny such a point.

It may be true, as Ashment claims, that "LDS authors can appeal only" to this and that old text for parallels to support the historicity of texts like the book of Abraham, but such texts provide a window to the past, and what they show is not entirely insubstantial. Such historical arguments as those Ashment rejects, of course, do not constitute a final proof, since, as he recognizes, history is not an arena where absolute proofs are likely to be found. But the parallels Nibley identifies raise some interesting questions and hence would seem to require an explanation. However, Ashment declines to explain how Joseph Smith could have come up with anything that looks authentically ancient. Instead, he apparently sees in texts like the book of Abraham merely signs of Joseph Smith's imaginative reworking of the gossip floating around his own environment.

Disarray over Historical Method

In order to charter his stance, Ashment advances a view of historical method, though he does not seem to realize that there are significant differences of opinion over methodological issues in dealing with the past. His view, while still held by some, is not without criticisms, nor is it in ascendancy. His assumption about how historians both can and must let evidence (or facts) do the talking runs counter to the best recent thought about reading texts, for it is a crude and now rather widely rejected positivism that assumes that there is much of anything evident apart from theories, assumptions, or formal or informal preunderstandings. Those familiar with the discussions of historical method now tend to hold that such theories, assumptions, and preunderstandings are necessarily brought to texts by the exegete or historian, consequently making for them
something evident in those texts, and thereby opening a window to the past.

Ashment objects to what he labels "obscurantist works" that (1) provide either reasons for believing that the Book of Mormon is historically authentic or (2) attempt to explicate the meaning of that text on the assumption that it is genuine history. But it may be that what is obscurantist is a denial that something genuinely historical is at stake. Why is that so? Ashment suggests that a text like the Book of Mormon may contain what he calls a true "theology" without being historically authentic, but he has not shown either what that "truth" could possibly be or why anyone would be interested in it, if it were to turn out that the Book of Mormon is merely nineteenth-century fiction. Since he seems to want to claim that a "theology" might survive the rejection of the historical authenticity of a text like the Book of Mormon, it would seem necessary for him to set forth precisely the authority, contents, and grounds that such a "theology" might have that would presumably survive his attack on the historical authenticity of large portions of the Mormon canon.

Finally, Ashment contends that to deny his view that the book of Abraham and the Book of Mormon are Joseph Smith’s fiction is to reject "modern theology," by which he seems to mean some of the presuppositions behind or conclusions of liberal Protestant speculation about the Bible, some of which implicitly or explicitly deny the reality of the resurrection of Jesus, making certain crucial portions of the biblical narrative ahistorical and in that sense mythical. Clearly, one of the functions of the Book of Mormon is to teach the Saints not to go whoring after seemingly clever theories that debunk the grounds and contents of faith. Furthermore, according to Ashment, to hold that a text like the Book of Mormon is a genuine ancient history is to adopt a crude Protestant Fundamentalist belief in the inerrancy of the scriptures, although he neglects to explain how this necessarily follows from anything he has set forth, nor what this means, especially in a Mormon context.

"While the historian," according to Ashment, "seeks to base his conclusions empirically on the evidence, the fundamentalist apologist, having already arrived at his conclusions according to his faith, presumptuously admits as relevant only those facts that support his conclusions" (p. 251). Leaving aside the question of whether there can be "evidence" without a theory that makes something evident, Ashment seems
to have done something similar to what he finds fault with by brushing aside parallels between the book of Abraham and certain older texts clearly bearing on the Abraham question. And what exactly is a “fundamentalist apologist”? There are many possibilities—more than one might expect. For example, if the historian were a Freudian or a Marxist, would we anticipate that such a one would see the past through his theoretical or ideological lens? Obviously we would. Would there be any account of the past that would not be some particular account, with a set of assumptions at work within it and with some theory being defended? Obviously not. Why then not allow a Christian or Mormon account of some portion of the past?

One might hold that such a faith necessarily corrupts historical judgment. But that would be true only if one had some independent way of knowing that a Christian or Mormon faith was simply untrue. Does not every account of the past involve theory, assumptions, categories, explanations? If a presuppositionless exegesis is impossible, and hence no account of the past possible without employing background assumptions and implicit or explicit theory, then to exclude the perspective flowing from a particular faith on the grounds that the account somehow corrupts the story to be told is to beg the important questions.

Ashment appears to see things otherwise: he asserts that the “fundamentalist apologist,”49 that is, the believer,

views historical methodology as a threat, because from his perspective it might cause the “fundamental reconstruction of the faith.” He [the fundamentalist apologist] accuses historians, whose writings do not

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49 Ashment labels those whose views he dislikes “fundamentalist apologists,” using a vocabulary found in Protestant seminaries, where a battle has been going on over the control of religious communities. Of course, those Latter-day Saints he attacks with such labels do not see themselves in those terms. Instead, they see themselves as doing what historians must do in order to be faithful to the texts that provide the ground for their accounts. When a contest over the meaning of the scriptures is conducted by those who blast away at their opponents with charges of being fundamentalists, literalists, apologists, believers in infallibility and inerrancy, and so forth, the slogans of a political battle within the Protestant world are being called upon within a Mormon context. Since RLDS intellectuals tend to have been indoctrinated in Protestant seminaries and find themselves in a battle much like that going on in the Protestant world, they are ahead of their Latter-day Saint counterparts in the use of such slogans.
support his hermeneutics, of doing just that: "deconstructing and reconstructing the faith."50 (p. 251)

But if one begins with a presupposition such as "dead bodies do not come back to life," this will necessarily lead to the conclusion that Jesus was not resurrected; and to hold this opinion will transform the content and even the possibility of faith. Of course, faith does not need proofs, historical or otherwise, which may be impossible or at least presumptuous from the perspective of the believer. However, it is also the case that faith, which must include the resurrection of Jesus, for a genuine Latter-day Saint—on that issue there can be no equivocation—can be supported with reasons, which involve what is contained in the witness found in the Mormon canon, but not, of course, coerced with proofs. And faith, for Latter-day Saints, thus involves historical content, since, for example, the claim that Jesus is the Christ is at least partly a statement about the past—that one Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and later resurrected, and so forth. Or, to take another example, to begin with the dogma that "you don't get books from angels and translate them by miracles" will necessarily lead to the conclusion that the Book of Mormon is neither genuine history nor contains an authentic prophetic message. And to either begin with or eventually reach that conclusion clearly alters the content of faith, if it does not destroy its possibility, by simply removing its grounds. The Saints have always seen clearly that Joseph Smith's prophetic claims necessarily involve claims about what really happened in the past, such as the belief that there actually was a Lehi colony and that a resurrected Jesus actually visited the remnants of that colony. That history is not the arena of final proofs does not mean that faith can have no historical grounding or contents, as Mormon revisionists wrongly assume, since it is

50 Ashment is quoting language from a talk I gave in 1984 to the Religious Education faculty at BYU. See Louis Midgley, "Faith and History," in Robert L. Millet, ed., "To Be Learned Is Good, If..." (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 219-26, for the published version of the lecture Ashment cites. Previously I had been labelled a "traditionalist." See Thomas G. Alexander, "Historiography and the New Mormon History: A Historian's Perspective," Dialogue 19/3 (Fall 1986): 26, 44-45 n. 5. I am not entirely displeased by such primitive labelling, since I enjoy being a pariah among revisionists bent on altering the Mormon past in order to reconstitute the Church in their own image.
both presumptuous and unnecessary to hold that the object of faith can be demonstrated or proven to be true by historical inquiry alone in the absence of a charism from God.51

Ashment presents a number of details about this and that issue in the interpretation of the Bible, but he neglects to set forth and then defend an argument in anything like a satisfactory manner. He is meticulous about some matters—for example, when he thinks he has caught Nibley in a mistake over some detail—but when it comes to the larger issues, he does not fare very well, especially when he begins to advance his opinions on historical method and on the philosophical issues surrounding the interpretation of texts.

The Revisionist Agenda

In 1988, Marvin S. Hill described Dan Vogel as "a disaffected Mormon" who has striven to trace what he considers the actual historical background of the Book of Mormon. Convinced that Joseph Smith wrote the volume, he attributes some of its ideas to Joseph Smith's money digging experiences and much of the rest to his desire to answer questions about the Indians that had been hotly debated in America since the sixteenth century.52

If Hill is correct, we have an explanation for the bias found in the articles Vogel has assembled in Essays on Mormon Scripture. Vogel was incensed by Hill's remarks,53 claiming

53 Dan Vogel, "Don't Label Me," Dialogue 22/1 (Spring 1989): 5-8. Hill claims that Vogel "tends to be heavily dependent upon Wesley Walters at key points." See Hill, "The 'New Mormon History' Reassessed," 124. For evidence of such dependence, see Vogel's Indian Origins, 77 nn. 19 and 6., 78 nn. 8-10. Vogel is annoyed by the way Hill places him in his right-center-left classification schema: "to place various historical works into one of three categories—conservative, moderate, and liberal—tends to oversimplify and distort the real situation" (p. 5). Hill actually situates Mormon historians on a "conservative right," in his own "middle ground," with anti-Mormons being placed to his "left." Those he places on the left
that the book that was cited as evidence of his anti-Mormon stance did "not deal with the truth claims of the Mormon religion and therefore [he] does not fit Hill's 'far left' category." But on this issue, Hill is right about Vogel. Why is that so? The reason is that attacking the historicity of the Book of Mormon cannot be understood as defending Joseph Smith's prophetic truth claims. But Vogel is correct in claiming that there are some who want to deny the claims upon which that faith rests and yet still appear to remain within the Church. And he finds it advantageous to appear to be setting forth opinions that fall well within the legitimate range of scholarly opinions on Mormon issues. What Vogel has not demonstrated is that his stance involves more than a murky sentimentalism or a confidence game aimed at accomplishing covertly what has not been done directly—namely, eradicating by radical transformation the faith resting on Joseph Smith's prophetic claims.

In an effort to explain his stance, Vogel claims that "for various reasons an increasing number of faithful Mormons are suggesting that it may be possible to question the Book of Mormon's historicity and yet maintain a belief in its sacred and inspired nature." No doubt some on the fringes of the include Vogel, the late Reverend Wesley P. Walters and Jerald Tanner. Vogel indicates that he generally admires Hill's work, upon which he seems somewhat dependent. See, for example, Vogel's Religious Seekers, x, xiii nn. 7-8, 18 n. 22-23, 40, 42 nn. 11 and 25, 43 n. 32, 44 n. 35-36, 47 nn. 68 and 70, 91 n. 14, 93 nn. 46, 49, and 71, 210 nn. 77-78, 215-16, 219 n. 6, 218 nn. 1-2. In this later work, Vogel tends to rely much more heavily upon Hill at crucial points than he does upon Walters (pp. 43 n. 32, 44 nn. 35-36). Vogel appears to yearn to be seen as close to Hill on most issues. Hence, when Hill speaks of his own "middle ground" stance on the writing of Mormon history, Vogel longs to be seen as one of those who is "perhaps just left of center, who are similarly trying to face the past with courage and with faith" (p. 7). But since Hill places some distance between his own "middle ground" Mormon history and that being done by those on his clearly anti-Mormon "left," Vogel wonders whether "Hill has not retained the old belief that everyone to the left of himself is an enemy of Mormonism seeking to destroy the faith" (p. 7).

Vogel, "Don't Label Me," 6.

Vogel, Indian Origins, 71, quoted by Vogel in "Don't Label Me," 6. In 1986, in his Indian Origins, 101 n. 1, Vogel drew attention to Sterling M. McMurrin and George D. Smith as examples of authors with Latter-day Saint connections who have been questioning the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. One wonders why Vogel did not also
Mormon community deny the historicity of the Book of Mormon and yet allow portions of it to be somehow "inspiring." But can that be done coherently? Vogel merely labels as "faithful"—though he does not explain how that can be—those who deny the historicity of the Book of Mormon. Such a tactic seems to beg the crucial question by assuming what needs to be demonstrated. Vogel merely asserts that "to question the Book of Mormon's historicity is not necessarily an attack on the Mormon religion." Here we have the key to revisionist legerdemain in dealing with the Book of Mormon and hence with the historical foundations of Mormon faith.

Hill also drew attention to the close relationship between Vogel and the late Wesley P. Walters, whom Vogel finds it necessary to describe as "a well-known opponent of Mormonism." Vogel is incensed because, in describing the Reverend Walters, Hill has taken "advantage of the existing prejudice in many Mormon minds towards their evangelical opponents." This statement suggests that Vogel no longer has an aversion to the "evangelical opponents" of the Church. Of course the Saints have a predisposition to reject the premises of their "opponents."

There is evidence of what Hill sees as Vogel's anti-Mormon proclivities. Vogel's first literary venture was an essay entitled "Is the Book of Mormon a Translation? A Response to Edward H. Ashment," which was published in a magazine entitled Journal of Pastoral Practice. It was prefaced by the following statement by the Reverend Walters:

Dan Vogel, a former member and missionary of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, over a year ago made the difficult decision to leave the Mormon Church. He is presently considering the claims of Christianity. Meanwhile he is putting into writing some of the internal conflicts of Mormonism that helped shape his decision to leave the LDS Church. The following article is one of the best

include Fawn M. Brodie and Dale L. Morgan in this list, since their views were not entirely unlike those of the writers he cited. See Gary F. Novak, "Naturalistic Assumptions and the Book of Mormon," BYU Studies 30/3 (Summer 1990): 21-40, for a careful examination of the position of Brodie, Morgan, and some others who have advanced various naturalistic explanations of the Book of Mormon.

discussions we have seen to date on the problems involved in Joseph Smith's claim to have 'translated' the *Book of Mormon*. We are pleased to make this material available to readers of the *Journal*.

Vogel recently claimed that his literary ventures do "not deal with the truth claims of the Mormon religion" because something he calls the "metaphysical aspects of religion" cannot be tested by historical means. With this assertion in place, Vogel insists that his *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* "does not deal with the truth claims of the Mormon religion," though he concedes that in his conclusion he explores "the possible implications of my research on the historicity of the Book of Mormon." Vogel thus insists that by attacking the historicity of the Book of Mormon he is not necessarily rejecting what he calls "the Mormon religion." Like a number of those whose essays he included in *Essays on Mormon Scripture*, Vogel attempts to separate "the question of the book's historicity from [the] truth claims of the Mormon religion."

But Vogel is attempting to test historically the claims upon which Mormon faith rests, for that faith clearly includes and is grounded upon a complex story that is open to historical inquiry. Without a real Lehi colony, how could there have

57 Ibid., 7.
58 Vogel, "Is the Book of Mormon a Translation? A Response to Edward H. Ashment," *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 5/3 (1982): 75-91. This note is found on the facing page to Vogel's essay, which does not carry a page number. The *Journal of Pastoral Practice* commenced publication in 1977 and for six years included a section entitled "Para Christianity," edited by the Reverend Walters, who frequently included his own anti-Mormon polemics, as well as those of H. Michael Marquardt and Rodger I. Anderson. For those unfamiliar with the *Journal of Pastoral Practice*, it should be noted that, in addition to such engaging features as the one provided by the Reverend Walters, the magazine regularly carries medical advice by a Dr. Robert D. Smith in a section entitled "Medicine and Health." In the number in which Vogel published his initial attack on the Book of Mormon, Dr. Smith published an article entitled "Irritable Bowel Syndrome." Other items in the same vein have dealt with such topics as "Chronic Diarrhea," "Behavior and Food Coloring," "Posture" (in children), as well as a number of articles on headaches.
59 Vogel, "Don't Label Me," 7, 6.
60 See Midgley, "Faith and History," 219-26 for an elaboration of this point.
been a real resurrected Nephite angel who later visited with Joseph Smith, or real plates, all of which are part of the controlling narrative of the Mormon faith? Hence, whether the Book of Mormon is authentic ancient history and also whether the story of visits of heavenly messengers is accurate are questions within the province of historical inquiry. What this means is that to compromise in a radical way one essential aspect of the founding narrative calls into question all of the other elements. Conversely, to find reasons to believe that, for example, the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient history provides justification for the account of its coming forth. In any event, Mormon faith is not speculative, that is, it does not rest on Vogel’s abstruse “metaphysical aspects,” whatever that language may mean.

A disenchanted Vogel once found a patron in the late Reverend Walters. Vogel may now have discerned that association with notorious anti-Mormons, whose diatribes can be heard as part of the “Electronic Church,” is not likely to have an impact on the Mormon community. Be that as it may, he has found a new patron in George D. Smith, owner of Signature Books, who seems to have gone through a somewhat similar shift from his previous, more blatant forms of anti-Mormon polemics to a smoother, less abrasive and less direct approach attempting to mold and transform the Mormon faith. Like those Vogel calls “evangelical opponents” of the Church, whose crusades consist of open attacks on the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims, part of Smith’s effort involves showing that the Book of Mormon is not an authentic ancient history, that is, not simply true.

But, sensing that he is not likely to be taken seriously if his revisionist agenda were widely known, Vogel now poses as one

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61 Prior to his death, the Reverend Walters was featured attacking Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon as recently as October 1990 on D. James Kennedy’s unctuous radio program called “Truths That Transform,” merchandised through his Coral Ridge Ministries, in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

interested in making available what the cover of *Essays on Mormon Scripture* calls “timely and thought-provoking discussions of Mormon canon.” The premise behind such accounts is that Joseph Smith, either knowingly or unknowingly, produced fiction, inspired or otherwise, rather than an authentic ancient history and the word of God. When the Book of Mormon is read in this way, that is, as “theology” cast in fictional-archaeomorphic form, the sources from which Joseph Smith presumably borrowed as he crafted the fictional Book of Mormon are said to be themes found in the literature of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, whenever these sources are interpreted to have religious significance, Vogel and his associates find them to be largely sectarian Protestant in one form or another.63

In putting together *Essays on Mormon Scripture*, Vogel seems to have intentionally selected papers that challenge the traditional understanding of revelation found within the Mormon canon. These writers tend to seek to replace the traditional understanding of revelation (and of the prophetic claims upon which the Church rests) with what Vogel quaintly describes as a more “refined” understanding of the “human aspects of prophets, revelations, or scriptures.” He claims (without giving any proof) that to make such a shift “does not detract from religion, as some traditionalists fear. On the contrary, what cultural and environmental studies challenge are simplistic assumptions about the nature of revelation” (p. viii). What this amounts to is the claim that Mormon scripture is not in any genuine sense the word of God, but merely language generated by cultural and environmental forces.

The ideology being advanced is articulated in the essay Vogel produced with Metcalfe. They end their article by asking about the implications of their opining

for the nature of inspiration, revelation, and scripture?

It should be clear that the revelatory process is more

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complex than simplistic verbal models allow. Some
Mormon scholars have therefore suggested models of
revelation which account for all the aspects
encountered in scripture. (p. 211)

Vogel and Metcalfe have in mind a theory of revelation currently
being advanced by Anthony A. Hutchinson. Of course, they
strive to put the best possible light on Hutchinson’s speculation
about prophets and revelation.64

Hutchinson’s theory about what constitutes divine
revelation allows him to claim that Joseph Smith, either
knowingly or unknowingly, generated out of his own
environment or cultural setting the story of heavenly messen-
gers, the Book of Mormon, the book of Moses (including the
Enoch materials), and the book of Abraham. He claims that
doing that sort of thing can be seen as constituting “divine
revelation.” Hutchinson’s premise is that what was produced by
the presumably dissociative Joseph Smith must now be thought
of as “inspired” and is really all there ever has been in the way of
prophecy and revelation.

The essays reprinted in Essays on Mormon Scripture are
neither among the best work currently available on the Mormon
canon, as the paper by Curtis clearly illustrates, nor on the other
topics discussed by the authors whose essays are included. For
example, if Anthony A. Hutchinson’s speculation warrants
reprinting, why not include one of his more substantial
efforts?65

64 See n. 46, above, for an account of Hutchinson’s reduction of
revelation to dissociative myth production. See Midgley, “The Challenge of
Historical Consciousness,” 543-44, 549-51, for an account of Hutchinson’s
efforts to reduce revelation to instances of something like medieval
mysticism.

65 Vogel has reprinted Hutchinson’s “Prophetic Foreknowledge,”
wonders why Hutchinson’s “LDS Approaches to the Holy Bible,” Dialogue
15/1 (Spring 1982): 100-124, or his “A Mormon Midrash?” were not
included in Essays on Mormon Scripture, since both of them fit within its
ideological parameters, and both are more substantial than the essay that was
reprinted. In addition, both of these essays are cited in Essays on Mormon
Scripture. For “LDS Approaches,” see 158 n. 4, and for “A Mormon
Midrash?” see 219 n. 89. In addition, Ashment, in his previously
unpublished essay, draws upon Hutchinson’s “A Mormon Midrash?” for
support five times, though oddly he cites a draft rather than the published
version, which raises questions concerning the care with which Essays on
Hutchinson advances what might be seen as a version of Nehorism, for he does not, like Korihor, flatly deny that prophets could possibly know the future—that would involve a dogmatic atheism, which he rejects. Instead, he argues that the notion that prophets sometimes speak of genuine future events is an inadequate image of prophetic foreknowledge since not a single example of such a power can be found. A remarkable consensus on this point exists among biblical scholars, both those who deny the possibility of miraculous foreknowledge and those who confess the possibility of miraculously bestowed objective knowledge of the future. (p. 30)

For Hutchinson, God could reveal the future, but has simply never done so. He maintains that such a view “does not

Mormon Scripture was edited. Assuming that Ashment may not know that “A Mormon Midrash?” has been published, why would not the editor of this volume make the necessary adjustments, since wholesale changes were made in almost every essay included in Essays on Mormon Scripture? Vogel has been active in modifying the endnotes of the essays he has republished. In a number of instances he managed to insert (or have inserted) in essays by Lindgren, Thomas, and Curtis citations to his own work. See 62 n. 2, 77 nn. 4 and 6, 93 n. 36, 78 n. 14, 96 n. 36, 216 n. 53, 217 n. 66. This constitutes the most persistent (and also, as it turns out, embarrassing) updating of secondary sources cited in the Essays on Mormon Scripture. In two instances Vogel has allowed the following language to introduce the citation of his own work: “For a good discussion of . . ., see,” which is followed by reference to something he has published (see pp. 77 n. 4, 93 n. 6).

66 Another instance in which this volume quotes out of context appears in the “Epilogue” to Essays on Mormon Scripture, which consists of three separate passages culled from two books by Elder John A. Widtsoe, to which has been given the title “Search the Scriptures Critically” (p. 265). If Elder Widtsoe’s remarks are instructive, why not include all of what he said on the subject, rather than cut and paste his words? The statement by Elder Widtsoe has been fashioned as follows: (1) language from the introductory passage to a chapter entitled “Higher Criticism,” from his In Search of Truth: Comments on the Gospel and Modern Thought (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1930), 81-82; (2) a portion of his answer to the question: “Is the Bible Translated Correctly?” from his Evidences and Reconciliations: Aids to Faith in a Modern Day (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1943), 98-99; and (3) an additional passage from In Search of Truth, 90-92. What is included is presented in such a way that the reader may not realize
impeach the inspiration of the Book of Mormon nor compromise its scriptural status” (p. 39), though he neglects to show how either of these positions follows from what he mentions. Instead, he defends his stance with the further claim that “the Book of Mormon, regardless of its reliability as historical evidence, teaches that God does reveal himself” (p. 40), though again he neglects to give an explanation of how a work of nineteenth-century fiction, filled with theological overtones woven into a narrative by a dissociative scryer, could reveal anything about divine things, even inadvertently. In order to get to something like the proper opinion on the scriptures, the Saints should now, according to Hutchinson, begin “reformulating our understanding of our faith” (p. 41). The implication is that we

that Elder Widtsoe contradicted the controlling assumptions at work in Essays on Mormon Scripture by insisting that “the attempt to ascribe to the Bible a purely human origin has not been successful.” Contrary to Anthony A. Hutchinson’s thesis in “Prophetic Foreknowledge” (pp. 29-42), Elder Widtsoe argued for a genuine “predictive element” in the Bible, quoting someone to the effect that “no efforts of the higher criticism have been able altogether to disguise the fact that there are predictions of events in it, and fulfillments of them at later dates” (In Search of Truth, 92-93). He also argued that the reality (and, by implication, the nature) of God are the real issues that must distinguish a Latter-day Saint approach to biblical criticism from much gentile scholarship:

Acceptance of God as our Father under whose direction we are upon earth, leads to one use of the facts of Biblical criticism; rejection of God leads to quite another. Higher criticism as an issue in modern thought is essentially concerned with the question of the existence of God. Many of those who have pursued higher criticism have done so to find support for their atheism, and the views of these have been heard more widely than those emanating from believers in God. The results of all sound scholarship are welcomed by Latter-day Saints. Higher criticism is not excluded. To us, however, the most certain fact, the best authenticated and most demonstrable, is the existence of God. This knowledge can not be laid aside in any human research.

Elder Widtsoe also affirmed that “the scriptures have been given by God and under His direction; but in the language of man.” “Naturally, therefore, in outside form there may be many errors, but in inner substance the eternal truth is preserved for those who can read the language understandingly” (In Search of Truth, 82-84). These and other statements are relevant to the controlling theme of Essays on Mormon Scripture.
will then have a new, different and better faith, with Hutchinson pointing the way. But, recast in this way, the faith would no longer carry authoritative claims or make genuinely binding demands or promises.

Vogel and Metcalfe claim that there is, in addition to that provided by Hutchinson, "another term to describe Joseph Smith's methodology," as they understand such things, which they label "prophetic eclecticism," and by which they mean "an inspired use of environment. 'Prophetic eclecticism' allows for the dynamic, inspired, or creative exchange between a prophet and his cultural environment. It allows the prophet to reshape concepts from the wider cultural setting into a new whole and helps to explain the presence of both similar and unique elements encountered in prophetic utterance" (p. 211). They ask:

Where does this leave inspiration and revelation?
Where they have always been: in the realm of subjective judgment. We are free to explore the historical and human aspects of scripture, but determining whether a concept is 'inspired' or the 'word of God' must always remain purely individualistic. When we realize that there is no empirical evidence either for or against scriptural inspiration, we begin to avail ourselves of a more sensitive, responsible scholarship as well as a more honest faith.67 (pp. 211-12)

What should one make of the argument "that there is no empirical evidence either for or against scriptural inspiration?" Such a claim makes sense if and only if one has already decided that revelation cannot possibly teach about reality. But the Book of Mormon clearly claims to do just that. And hence anything

that can be said either for or against that claim either supports or detracts from that claim. One only needs a novel definition of prophets and revelation when one has already decided that the Book of Mormon is not simply true, that there was no Lehi colony and hence no plates and no real angel instructing Joseph Smith. But to advance such a theory is not in any fundamental way different from the stance that has always been taken by despisers of the restored gospel. It leaves the restoration exactly where the enemies of the Church have always wanted it—repudiated.

The Signature Gift

With the publication of *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, second in a series of books on Mormon doctrine, scripture and thought,68 Signature Books again manifests a fondness for a catchy title masking the real contents of a book. It is instructive to compare *Essays on Mormon Scripture* with *Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*,69 a book which seems to rest on the assumption that what the Saints believe to have been revealed over time to Joseph Smith was inconsistent and discontinuous, and hence not, as the title of the


book would seem to indicate, a coherent setting forth of an essentially consistent body of teachings bit by bit. Instead, according to some of the articles in this anthology, the revelations to Joseph Smith between 1830 and 1835 were similar to Protestant teachings found in the sectarian environment, and after 1835 a reconstruction of Mormon doctrine replaced the pessimism presumably found in the Book of Mormon (and the Doctrine and Covenants) with an optimistic and progressive\(^{70}\) (or liberal)\(^{71}\) theology. *Essays on Mormon Doctrine* thus tends to challenge the received opinion that the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ involved a “line upon line” coherent unfolding.

Furthermore, Dan Vogel is not the only favorite of the late Wesley P. Walters to find a home with Signature Books. We might also mention Rodger I. Anderson, who was unknown in the Mormon intellectual community until his recent attempt to breathe life into the affidavits manufactured by a fellow named Doctor Philastus Hurlbut. Hurlbut was, for a short time, a Mormon, but was excommunicated in 1833 and turned against Joseph Smith.\(^{72}\) The cover to *Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined*, published by Signature Books, reports that Roger I. Anderson is “a native of Salt Lake City and graduate in philosophy from the University of Utah, [and] currently resides in Oklahoma. He is a freelance writer specializing in nineteenth-century religions.”\(^{73}\) This is not the entire story, for Anderson is a “career apostate” whose publications include at least one anti-Mormon tract written from

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\(^{71}\) See O. Kendall White, Jr., *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), which was originally written as a 1967 Master’s thesis at the University of Utah, entitled “The Social Psychological Basis of Mormon New-Orthodoxy.”

\(^{72}\) Hurlbut seems to have provided E. D. Howe with a portion of the materials spread to the world in his *Mormonism Unvailed* (Painesville, OH: privately printed, 1834).

\(^{73}\) See Richard Lloyd Anderson’s review of Rodger I. Anderson’s *Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined* on pages 52-80 of the present volume.
a Fundamentalist Protestant stance. Anderson ends this earlier denunciation against Mormonism with what he calls

a word of personal testimony. I was born and raised in the Mormon Church, and served a two year mission in the central states area. It was during this mission that I began an intensive and prayerful study of Mormon theology and history. I found their teachings to be internally inconsistent, their history greatly falsified, and their doctrines in radical disagreement with the Bible. After much opposition and internal struggle, I finally left the Mormon Church. Two years later I became a Christian. Christ lifted me from the errors and self-satisfaction of Mormonism and gave me an assurance of personal salvation.74

Unlike the authors in Essays on Mormon Scripture, Anderson is a firm believer in what he explicitly describes as the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible.75 But like a number of those whose articles are included in Essays on Mormon Scripture, Anderson insists that “the Book of Mormon is obviously a product of its own times.”76

A further indication of the agenda of Signature Books is the fact that Rodger I. Anderson’s effort to resuscitate the old tales about Joseph Smith was first published in the Journal of Pastoral Practice under the sponsorship of Wesley P. Walters.77

74 Rodger I. Anderson, The Bible and Mormonism (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith, Prayer & Tract League, n.d.), 23. This item was apparently published during the 1970s.
75 Ibid., 4, 18.
76 Ibid., 6-7. He cites as evidence for that claim (p. 13) the famous passage from Alexander Campbell’s Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon (Boston: Greene, 1832); and Walter Franklin Prince’s “Psychological Tests for the Authorship of the Book of Mormon,” American Journal of Psychology 28/3 (July 1917): 373-89. On the basis of fragments from these essays, Anderson asserts that “the cultural climate from which the Book of Mormon emerged is sufficient to account for its existence.”
Like Vogel, Anderson was initially supported by Reverend Walters; their current patron is George D. Smith, who, in 1984, published an attack on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. In introducing that essay, Paul Kurtz, editor of Free Inquiry, a magazine dedicated to advancing aggressive atheism, described George D. Smith, as “a lifelong member of the church,” whose essay “provides a detailed critical examination of Joseph Smith and his claim that the Book of Mormon was divinely revealed.”

In their account of the Hofmann affair, Linda Sillitoe and Allen D. Roberts claim that Steven F. Christensen, killed by one of Hofmann’s bombs, “recorded in his journal Hofmann’s characterization of two men—Wesley Walters, a Presbyterian minister, and George Smith, a California businessman, who were both active in the Mormon intellectual community—as

subsections in the journal article have been transformed into chapters as it was made into a book. In Indian Origins (p. 78 n. 7), Vogel cites Roger I. Anderson’s “Joseph Smith’s Early Reputation Revisited.”


'anti-Mormons'.” They add: “What Christensen did not say was that he [Hofmann] had recently discussed with Smith the possibility of Smith underwriting some of the research projects Christensen had either inaugurated or envisioned.”

Mormon Egyptologist Ed Ashment met Hofmann and Brent Metcalfe at the LDS historical department library. Metcalfe showed him the papyrus fragment [on loan from Kenneth Rendell, a Massachusetts document dealer] and asked if he could tie it to other Joseph Smith papyri. Ashment said he couldn’t on the spur of the moment but offered to check some references. Then Ashment . . . pulled out a Polaroid camera and snapped a photograph of the papyrus. Neither Hofmann nor Metcalfe would tell Ashment where the fragment had come from. When Hofmann, through Metcalfe, then offered to sell the fragment to George Smith for $30,000, Smith declined. In early July [1985] Smith had acceded to Hofmann’s repeated requests to invest in the Charles Dickens ‘Haunted Man’ manuscript [one of Hofmann’s spectacular forgeries], hoping to gain access to any papyri Hofmann had to help with a research project he had assumed from Christensen earlier that year.80

80 Sillitoe and Roberts, Salamander, 329, 340-41. They “are grateful to George D. Smith, our publisher, whose optimism, faith, and unflagging support made” their writing and publishing possible (Salamander, x). Naifeh and Smith, in their account of the Hofmann Affair, claim that Christensen heard reports of “Wesley Walters and George Smith, both ‘notorious anti-Mormons,’ according to Hofmann.” They also claim that Hofmann “told them how Wesley Walters and George Smith had somehow found out about the [non-existent McLellin] collection and contacted the owner.” Naifeh and Smith, The Mormon Murders, 177, 185. Robert Lindsey claims that Hofmann told his close associates that he was having trouble raising $185,000 soon enough “to prevent the McLellin Collection from being acquired by critics of the church such as Jerald and Sandra Tanner; Wesley Walters, a Presbyterian minister in Marissa, Illinois, who often wrote about Mormon history in ways the church did not like; or George Smith, the publisher of Signature Books, whom [Steven] Christensen referred to as a ‘humanist, intellectual, anti-Mormon and semi-financially independent businessman’.” Lindsey, A Gathering of Saints, 173.
If the selection and agenda of essays for this volume is problematic, the editing also leaves much to be desired. For example, no bibliography has been provided and, hence, the reader is left in the dark as to what has been published on topics covered in this book from within the Mormon community. The book contains no indexes of authors, subject matter, or scriptures cited. And one wonders why the publisher chose to leave out such standard devices as are commonly found in well-edited works, especially since the book was manufactured with seven blank pages at the end. And why rewrite and refashion the essays being reprinted without telling the reader that such editing has taken place?

Books, it should be remembered, do not just happen; they are intentional acts. In order to understand a text, it is sometimes useful to understand the context in which it was written and compiled. This point is constantly being made in Essays on Mormon Scripture, which was itself the product of intentions and has its own purpose and context. 83

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81 Where an essay printed in Essays on Mormon Scripture has generated debate, Vogel neglects to mention that fact. For example, George D. Smith’s “Isaiah Updated” (pp. 113-30) was criticized by William Hamblin, “‘Isaiah Update’ Challenged,” Dialogue 17/1 (Spring 1984): 4-7, but this criticism is not mentioned in Vogel’s volume, which does not contain a full or balanced survey of either the range of opinion or the existing literature on the issues discussed in Essays on Mormon Scripture.

82 In his “Editor’s Introduction,” Vogel mentions that authors and publications have given their “permission to reproduce, sometimes in a different format and/or under a different title, many of the essays appearing here” (p. ix). The word “format” seems to suggest the sometimes substantial modifications that have been made in what was previously published, but Vogel does not indicate whether the authors themselves made the changes or whether these changes were made by others.

83 To whom does Vogel turn for assistance? For his first book, in 1986, Vogel called upon Brigham Madsen, Marvin S. Hill, Mario DePillis, Sterling M. McMurrin, Wesley P. Walters, and H. Michael Marquardt, among others, in addition to George D. Smith, Ronald L. Priddis, and Gary J. Bergera of Signature Books. See Indian Origins, 1-2. More recently he credits Thomas G. Alexander, Lavina Fielding Anderson, D. Michael Quinn, Marquardt, and Walters for having provided advice and suggestions. He also indicated that he is indebted to Grant Underwood and Marvin S. Hill for criticizing an earlier draft of his book, and that he has “benefitted from numerous conversations with Brent Lee Metcalfe” and George D. Smith, as well as Bergera and Priddis and the rest of the staff at Signature Books. Vogel, Religious Seekers, vii-viii. Of course, while many of these people
Scripture turns out to be a rather seriously flawed book partly because it is dedicated to showing that “the Mormon canon” does not contain what the faithful have always believed, namely the word of God, and hence at least in part, records of divine special revelations, but is, instead, merely a human contrivance. And, in addition, the essays included in his book are neither the most mature nor the most competently reasoned scholarship available on the Mormon canon. What distinguishes them is a distinct bias. Given the commitments of Signature Books and Dan Vogel it should come as no surprise that there is no competent, careful textual exegesis of the Mormon canon found in Essays on Mormon Scripture. Instead, most of these essays attempt to set in place a novel notion of what constitutes revelation based on some problematic background assumptions about the sacred texts. These then are used to charter the idea that the Saints should now begin to read their scriptures as mere fiction rather than fact. The Mormon faith, according to this view, should be seen as an essentially human fabrication, if not an entirely overt prevarication, rather than as a record of what really happened and as divine revelation, as these notions have traditionally been understood from the perspective of the restored gospel.

may endorse Vogel’s endeavors, some do not. For example, Grant Underwood has not been taken in by Vogel. See Underwood’s insightful review of Vogel’s Religious Seekers, in BYU Studies 30/1 (Winter 1990): 120-26.