The Latest Straw Man

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The failure of those who reject the historicity of the Book of Mormon to respond cogently to the increasing body of evidence and argument supporting historicity is becoming painfully apparent. Stephen E. Thompson’s recent review in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994) is one of the most recent examples of this “straw man” approach.
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Abstract: The failure of those who reject the historicity of the Book of Mormon to respond cogently to the increasing body of evidence and argument supporting historicity is becoming painfully apparent. Stephen E. Thompson’s recent review of Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 6/1 (1994) is one of the most recent examples of this “straw man” approach.

Although not a contributor to New Approaches to the Book of Mormon, Stephen E. Thompson is nonetheless an active partisan of the view that the Book of Mormon is nineteenth-century frontier fiction. Thompson’s most revealing previous essay is “Balancing Acts.” In it he explicitly denies the virgin birth of Christ, seriously doubts the resurrection (in what way, then, is Jesus the Son of God?), and rejects not only the historicity of all of Joseph’s ancient scriptures, but also of Joseph’s First Vision and the visitations of Moroni. It should thus come as no surprise that Thompson describes New Approaches to the Book of Mormon as “a piece of generally solid scholarship which contributes to a

1 Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed. New Approaches to the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993).
2 An unpublished paper given at the 1993 Sunstone East conference, manuscript in my possession.
3 See also Thompson’s “Messiah in Context,” Sunstone (February 1994): 75–78; and “Searching for the ‘Historical Jesus,’ ” Sunstone (June 1994): 58–61, for additional examples of Thompson’s rejection of many, if not all, of the traditional elements of Christ’s divinity.
better understanding of the nature and origin of this book of scripture [the Book of Mormon],” which uses “methodological rigor.” 4 On the other hand, the FARMS response in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 5 is, he asserts, “seriously flawed,” and filled with “dross and bile.” 6

Nonetheless, Thompson is not universally pleased with the contents of New Approaches to the Book of Mormon. The articles selected for Thompson’s reproof, however, are quite revealing. Thompson finds Anthony Hutchinson’s view that the Book of Mormon should be accepted as God-inspired fiction “unsatisfying” because it is based on Hutchinson’s “emotional reaction to the text.” 7 In this Thompson is in agreement with Louis Midgley’s critique. 8 However, it is unclear from Thompson’s remarks whether he is unsatisfied with Hutchinson because Thompson feels that Hutchinson has not made a strong enough case for the “inspired fiction” theory, or because Thompson believes the “uninspired fiction” theory is superior (I suspect the latter).

Melodie Charles’s article is criticized as “simply inadequate” because it is not radical enough—it “ignores recent scholarship . . . in which it is argued that in the Palestine of Lehi’s day there was no messianic expectation.” 9 In other words, Charles should

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6 Thompson, “‘Critical’ Book of Mormon Scholarship,” 205. I have no objection to partisan reviews; indeed, they generally are the most interesting and useful. But readers should be aware that Thompson is by no means unbiased in this matter. Of course neither am I. The difference is that I admit my biases, while many dissenters either assert that they have no biases or consciously hide their real beliefs and agendas.
7 Ibid., 198.
9 Thompson, “‘Critical’ Book of Mormon Scholarship,” 198. Of course, Thompson’s own view that “in the Palestine of Lehi’s day there was no messianic expectation” (198) ignores not only a great deal of ancient evidence, but recent scholarship as well; see, for example, Joseph Collins, The Scepter and the Star: Jewish Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls (New York: Doubleday, 1995), who discusses messianic ideas in the sixth century B.C., when
have rejected all Christian beliefs about the promised Messiah—as Thompson has apparently done—rather than simply those found in the Book of Mormon. Thus Thompson’s fundamental disagreement with New Approaches to the Book of Mormon seems to be that it simply hasn’t gone far enough in its criticism of the faith of the Latter-day Saints.

On another occasion Thompson criticizes the arguments of some of the authors of New Approaches to the Book of Mormon, ignoring the fact that the same arguments were found in the Review. Thus three of Edward Ashment’s arguments are seen by Thompson as “nonsensical,” but Thompson fails to inform us that Gee criticized Ashment for precisely the same errors, among many others. Why did Thompson not give credit to the Review for presenting these valid criticisms?

But despite these quibbles with New Approaches to the Book of Mormon, Thompson’s real purpose in his review is to attack the position taken in the Review. His most fundamental criticism focuses on the “tone,” which he finds too negative. An irony of Thompson’s critique is that his own review is certainly no less negative in tone than the Review. When Thompson calls some of Ashment’s arguments “nonsensical,” or labels Charles’s scholarship “inadequate,” or claims that the Review is “seriously flawed” and filled with “dross and bile,” Thompson is apparently doing serious scholarship. Why is it, then, when the authors of the Review make harsh judgments about New Approaches to the Book of Mormon they are apparently engaging in the “unsupported” use of “insulting or abusive language”? I readily admit that Review of Books on the Book of Mormon is a forthright and hard-hitting response to what we see as a seriously

Thompson claims “there was no messianic expectation.” (This book was published after Thompson’s review.)

10 Thompson, “‘Critical’ Book of Mormon Scholarship,” 199.


12 Thompson, “‘Critical’ Book of Mormon Scholarship,” 200.

13 Ibid., 199.

14 Ibid., 198.

15 Ibid., 205.

16 Ibid., 200.
flawed attack on a fundamental scripture of the Latter-day Saints. But its language is certainly no more abusive than Thompson’s own (nor, for that matter, than that of many other partisans of a nineteenth-century Book of Mormon).17 Unfortunately, there is no kind way to say that an author has written an incompetent article.

As part of his critique, Thompson claims that the Review “is not merely an attempt to evaluate the essays presented in *New Approaches*, but an effort to discredit totally the articles and authors.”18 Precisely the same could be said of Thompson’s review of the Review. Can anyone who has read only Thompson’s review tell what the fundamental disputed issues of *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* and the Review were? From Thompson’s review, one would get the impression that the Review contains only verbal insults, fundamentalist prattle, a mindless rejection of universally accepted scholarship, and numerous errors of fact because it is written by people employed by Brigham Young University (who by the very fact of their employment there shouldn’t be taken seriously as scholars). Really? Are there no substantial arguments presented in the 578 pages of the Review? Are the over 1100 footnotes simply window dressing? Is there no evidence or rational analysis presented that might lead thinking people to the conclusion that a case can be made for the historicity of the Book of Mormon? In reality, the Review focuses relentlessly on the arguments.19 The fact that there has been almost no substantive defense of the arguments found in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*—the main response has been, in common with Thompson, to claim that the Review is mean and nasty—clearly indicates the bankrupt nature of their enterprise.

Thompson strongly implies that the “abusive language” from FARMS is simply “unsupported” vituperation.20 In reality, the

18 Thompson, “‘Critical’ Book of Mormon Scholarship,” 200.
20 Ibid., 200–201.
occasional unpleasant things said about the arguments and authors of *New Approaches* are almost always part of a larger argument, and usually based on issues originally raised by the authors themselves. Thus, for example, it has been argued that only critics who reject the historicity of the Book of Mormon use “critical methods”; those who accept historicity are mere “apologists.” This is not simply an isolated *ad hominem* argument; related critiques have been repeatedly raised by several dissenters, as well as by Thompson himself in his review. In analyzing the validity of this argument, it seems relevant to note that nearly all the supposedly unscholarly “apologists” have Ph.D.s, and have published with a wide array of international academic journals and publishers. Yet Thompson feels that “the relevance of this impressive list of scholarly output is . . . questionable.” Why? Critics attack the scholarly capabilities of supporters of the historicity of the Book of Mormon. The *Review* pointed out that those capabilities are widely accepted by non-Mormon scholars throughout the world. How is this “irrelevant”? If a claim is made that Professor X is incompetent, then Professor X’s list of academic accomplishments is certainly relevant in determining the validity of the criticism. When critics question the scholarly ability of the defenders of historicity, a comparison of credentials and scholarly productivity is also in order. If critics do not want their own lack of credentials to be scrutinized they should not have raised this issue.

22 See ibid., 435 n. 3, for references.
23 Thompson, “‘Critical’ Book of Mormon Scholarship,” 205.
24 Ibid., 201.
25 Thompson goes on to claim that academic credentials in Near Eastern studies do not “qualify one to write on the Book of Mormon” (201). If this is true, one is forced to ask how Thompson’s degree in Egyptology somehow qualifies him to write on the Book of Mormon, or on the New Testament and early Christianity (see n. 3 above). Furthermore, if a Ph.D. and international publications in Near Eastern Studies do not “qualify” one to write on the Book of Mormon, how do the lack of any advanced degree in any subject and the lack of any publications outside of dissenting Latter-day Saint circles grant
Of course, such whining about “tone” (which has been the major, if not only response to the Review by the critics), is simply a thinly veiled obfuscation attempting to draw attention away from the real question—what are the fundamental issues, and whose arguments are superior? Thus criticisms about “tone” are themselves a fallacious ad hominem attack—a focus on the arguer rather than the argument. They are an attempt to win in the arena of public relations and rhetoric what they are apparently unable to win in the arena of evidence and analysis. Even if we were to grant that all contributors to the Review are in fact mean and nasty people, that would still beg the question—whose arguments are superior? Interested readers should examine both books and decide for themselves.

Despite his focus on “tone,” Thompson does attempt to raise a few substantive issues concerning portions of the Review. Unfortunately, Thompson’s criticisms often only serve to demonstrate that he has frequently either not understood the real argument or is intentionally creating a straw man. Thompson’s claim that “the approach to the Bible adopted by several contributors to the Review has much in common with that of Protestant fundamentalists who see the Bible as largely inerrant and historical” is simply wrong. In reality, no contributor to the Review is a scriptural inerrantist. This seems to be an attempt to impute guilt by association—since biblical inerrantists are seen as “unscholarly” by much of the secular academy, Thompson attempts to equate the reviewers of the Review with inerrantists. The only example Thompson gives of the supposedly widespread inerrantist assumptions in the Review is Richard Anderson, whom Thompson quotes as saying “all four Gospels . . . responsibly quot[e] the Savior, whether or not word-perfect.” How can Anderson possibly be seen as an inerrantist when he here admits that the Gospels might not be quoting the exact words of the Savior—in other words, that the texts are not inerrant? Despite Thompson’s misunderstanding, belief in the historicity of the Gospel narratives is not logically the equivalent of belief in their qualification? I strongly suggest that dissenters drop this silly argument; it is one they simply cannot win.

26 Thompson, “‘Critical’ Book of Mormon Scholarship,” 201.
27 Ibid.
inerrancy. While inerrantists must logically accept the historicity of the Gospels, one can reasonably accept historicity without insisting on inerrancy—e.g., one can accept the historicity of the Gallic wars without believing that Caesar’s account of those wars is inerrant.

Elsewhere Thompson asserts that John Gee and Royal Skousen should be condemned for maintaining that “the whole field of New Testament textual criticism is filled with practitioners who employ faulty methodology and whose results are unreliable.”28 In fact, neither Gee nor Skousen make any such universalistic claim—indeed, they both cite mainline textual critics to support their positions. Gee is claiming only that Stan Larson is guilty of the “best manuscript” fallacy—and provides several prominent textual critics to support the view that following the “best manuscript” is faulty methodology.29 Skousen argued that in test cases in which the autograph manuscripts exist, the standard assumption of many New Testament textual critics that the “harder” and “shorter” readings are more original is simply not supported—again, he provides evidence and analysis for his position.30 Even if the views of Gee and Skousen were minority positions, they are still supported by reputable scholars in textual criticism. It is not the mindless universal dismissal of scholars that Thompson implies.

Thompson’s unjustified criticism of Gee and Skousen furnishes just two examples of his overreliance on the fallacy of argument from authority. Repeatedly, Thompson denounces the authors of the Review as dismissing what he perceives as the universal position of the “scholars.”31 Can Thompson really be unaware of the wide range of interpretations and assumptions found in biblical and other branches of ancient studies? Thompson seems under the delusion that there is a universally held scholarly position on controversial issues and seems fixated on being in agreement with these “scholars.” The path to truth is

28 Ibid., 202.
29 Gee, review of New Approaches, 68–70.
31 Thompson, “‘Critical’ Book of Mormon Scholarship,” 198, 201–2.
thus reduced to discovering this universally held scholarly position and following it. On this same subject I elsewhere noted:

Within the secularized academic community there is absolutely no consensus on most of the issues discussed by [David P.] Wright—all they agree on is that the supernaturalists are wrong. If the secularists cannot agree among themselves, why should the supernaturalists jettison their interpretations for “clear conclusions and evidence generated [by the critical method],” which Wright claims exist, but whose existence he has by no means conclusively demonstrated.\(^{32}\)

In response to this statement, Thompson wrote:

Instances of disagreement among scholars are taken [by Hamblin] as an excuse for dismissing the critical approach to the scriptures entirely, and relying on an uncritical, dogma-driven exegesis.\(^{33}\)

Of course my statement implies absolutely nothing of the sort, as any reader of my essay in the Review can see.\(^{34}\) Wright claimed that we should reject the historicity of the Book of Mormon based on “clear conclusions and evidence” that seem to contradict some aspects of the Book of Mormon. I responded that these so-called “clear conclusions” are, in fact, far from clear or unanimous and that a wide range of scholarly opinion has been expressed on many of the issues under consideration. Neither Wright nor Thompson has disputed this fact. How in the world can my position lead Thompson to conclude that I am somehow calling “for dismissing the critical approach to the scriptures entirely, and relying on an uncritical, dogma-driven exegesis”? All that I dismiss are the untrue claims that critical methodologies have produced scholarly unanimity which somehow logically compels us to reject the historicity of the Book of Mormon. Furthermore, it

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\(^{33}\) Thompson, “Messiah in Context,” 78.

\(^{34}\) Hamblin, review of “Apologetic and Critical Assumptions,” by Metcalfe, 434–523.
is a logical fallacy to argue that scholarly consensus—even if it existed—should be seen as an infallible guide to the truth.

Thompson accuses the authors of the Review of “frequently” committing certain errors, while providing only one example of the supposed mistakes. Nonetheless, Thompson may have correctly identified several errors in the Review. There are undoubtedly many others—no scholar is infallible. Thompson himself, for example, falls into error when he claims that “the gospels circulated without titles (or authors) until the second half of the second century and that authors were assigned to them beginning about 180, not based on long-standing tradition.” The claim that “the gospels circulated without . . . authors” is manifestly false, ignoring the evidence of Papias (c. A.D. 70–140, and writing as early as A.D. 110), who mentions the gospels of both Matthew and Mark by name. One struggles not to believe that this is a case of intentional suppression of the evidence of Papias, since it is clear elsewhere that Thompson is aware of “the text [of Matthew] referred to by Papias [sic].”

Thompson’s final remarks are richly ironic. While tacitly admitting that those who accept the historicity of the Book of Mormon use critical methods in their analyses and arguments, Thompson concludes his review with the astounding assertion that “the work of many FARMS researchers does not qualify as ‘critical’ because they lack the essential ingredient of [academic] freedom.” Why? Because they are “employed by BYU”—indeed, “any [LDS] church employee is [not] truly ‘free’ when it comes to matters of LDS scholarship.” Thompson is seriously arguing that the work published by FARMS “does not qualify as ‘critical’ ” scholarship because some are employed by BYU, and therefore are not intellectually “free.” What preposterous nonsense!

35 Thompson, “ ‘Critical’ Book of Mormon Scholarship,” 200–201, 204.
36 Ibid., 202.
37 Cited by Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History III, 39, 15–16.
38 Thompson, “ ‘Critical’ Book of Mormon Scholarship,” 203.
39 Ibid., 205.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
In point of fact, quite the opposite is true. Before coming to BYU I worked at two secular universities. At neither of these schools was I "free" to publish on the Book of Mormon. At one university I was actually told by an administrator not to talk about Mormonism. Part of the reason I came to BYU was precisely to work in an environment of academic freedom so that I could write and think about Mormonism. Thus, in reality, I am free to state my views on the Book of Mormon precisely because I am employed by BYU. There is no other university in the world where I would enjoy such academic freedom. How, then, is my "freedom . . . considerably circumscribed" by my position at BYU? Is it really so impossible to accept the fact that some scholars have studied the evidence and come to the conclusion that a plausible case can be made for the historicity of the Book of Mormon, and that therefore working at BYU represents absolutely no infringement on their academic freedom, but instead is an enhancement of that freedom? I work at BYU because I believe; I do not believe because I work at BYU.

On the other hand, it could just as easily (and nonsensically) be argued that it is Thompson—who recently finished his Ph.D. and is currently searching for an academic position in Egyptology—whose intellectual freedom is curtailed by secular universities. If Thompson were to write articles supporting the historicity of the book of Abraham or the Book of Mormon, he would most probably be branded an Egyptological crank and black-balled from academia—it would be unlikely that he would ever get a job in Egyptology. Thus, using his own ad hominem methods, Thompson’s recent attacks on the historicity of the book of Abraham, the Book of Mormon, and the divinity of Christ could be seen as a manifestation that his own "intellectual freedom . . . is considerably circumscribed" by the orthodoxies of the secular academy. Is anything really accomplished by these silly rhetorical games? It is unfortunate that Thompson and many other critics groundlessly refuse to recognize the academic honesty and sincerity of those who disagree with them.

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
Another rich irony in Thompson’s “argument” is that, while he strongly condemns authors of the *Review* for mentioning the lack of academic credentials of most of the contributors to *New Approaches*; he, on the other hand, feels that pointing out that many contributors to the *Review* are employed by a major university is somehow evidence of their failure to use critical methods! If it is irrelevant that several contributors to *New Approaches* are in fact uncredentialedagnostics, how is it supremely relevant that several contributors to the *Review* are credentialed believers?

In order to dismiss their arguments Thompson repeatedly misrepresents and miscontextualizes what the authors of the *Review* have explicitly and clearly stated. Such “straw man” argumentation may win rhetorical points in certain dissenting Latter-day Saint circles by allowing dissenters to pretend that scholars who accept the historicity of the Book of Mormon can be summarily dismissed as mere “apologists”—after all, they work at BYU of all places. But it does nothing to clarify the issues or resolve the debate. Daniel C. Peterson’s cogent comments apply to Thompson as well as to many other critics of the Book of Mormon:

Do they . . . really confront the strongest arguments of those whose position they would refute? Or do they ignore the more persuasive arguments in order to focus on the weaker ones? Do they fairly and accurately state those arguments? Careful readers will want to note the use, in the essays under examination, of logical “straw men” that distort the positions of those who might offer resistance to these “New Approaches.”

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