7-31-1996

The Book of Mormon Wars: A Non-Mormon Perspective

Massimo Introvigne

Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum, Rome

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation


Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol5/iss2/1

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Title  The Book of Mormon Wars: A Non-Mormon Perspective

Author(s)  Massimo Introvigne


ISSN  1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract  The Protestant Bible wars were fought between fundamentalists, who initially claimed for the Bible the same “truth” that Enlightenment claimed for science, and liberals, who denied that historical “truth” could be achieved at all. In the present Book of Mormon wars the opposite seems to be true: the liberal camp appears deeply rooted in the Enlightenment paradigm, while the orthodox (but not fundamentalist) position often uses postmodernist arguments, claiming that absolute objectivity is a “noble dream” never achieved nor obtainable in historical studies. The article reviews the present Mormon controversies by comparing them to the discussions on biblical interpretation in the Roman Catholic Church, as summarized in the semiofficial 1993 document “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” by the Pontifical Biblical Commission.
The Book of Mormon Wars:  
A Non-Mormon Perspective

Massimo Introvigne

Abstract: The Protestant Bible wars were fought between fundamentalists, who initially claimed for the Bible the same “truth” that Enlightenment claimed for science, and liberals, who denied that historical “truth” could be achieved at all. In the present Book of Mormon wars the opposite seems to be true: the liberal camp appears deeply rooted in the Enlightenment paradigm, while the orthodox (but not fundamentalist) position often uses postmodernist arguments, claiming that absolute objectivity is a “noble dream” never achieved nor obtainable in historical studies. The article reviews the present Mormon controversies by comparing them to the discussions on biblical interpretation in the Roman Catholic Church, as summarized in the semiofficial 1993 document “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” by the Pontifical Biblical Commission.

1. The Book of Mormon Wars

In 1976 Harold Lindsell, a founding faculty member of the Evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, published his now famous book The Battle for the Bible.1

---

1 Permission has been granted by Cassell, London, to publish this expanded version of Massimo Introvigne, “The Book of Mormon Wars: A Non-Mormon Perspective,” in Mormon Identities in Transition, ed. Douglas J. Davies (London: Cassell, 1996), 25–34. The book can be obtained through Cassell, PO Box 605, Herndon, VA 22172; Tel: (800) 561-7704; Fax: (703) 661-1501.
Lindsell’s book chronicled the battle for the doctrine of inerrancy of the Bible within the Southern Baptist Convention, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, and the Fuller Theological Seminary itself, where moderately liberal Bible scholars were teaching by the 1970s. While Lindsell’s book is still a favorite among American fundamentalists, Lindsell himself made clear that it would be inaccurate to reduce the large variety of Protestant positions on the Bible to two camps only—liberal and fundamentalist—since, in fact, dozens of different positions between the two extremes seem to exist. Scholarly studies on Protestant fundamentalism, not to mention the study of fundamentalism as a broader category not necessarily confined to the Protestant world, have boomed in the last two decades. Since the publication of the movement’s manifesto, *The Fundamentals*, between 1910 and 1915, fundamentalism was often represented as a reaction against science. Recent scholarship, on the other hand, has suggested an alternative explanation, seeing fundamentalism as an attempt to secure for biblical truth the same certainty that science enjoyed according to the Newtonian and positivist paradigm.


2 Ibid., 106–21.


Evangelicalism and fundamentalism had, according to George M. Marsden, "a love affair with Enlightenment science" and hailed "objective scientific thought ... as the best friend of the Christian faith and of Christian culture generally." As there was only one "true" science (needless to say, not including evolution theories), so—the fundamentalists reasoned—there could be only one objective "truth" about the Bible: that it was the inerrant, infallible Word of God. Marsden has proved that hostility to science was originally foreign to fundamentalism and emerged as a later development, when science started to be secularized and to change its own paradigm. Fundamentalism, as a consequence, has been particularly hostile to late modernist and postmodernist assumptions that there is no "one science," but that science could be a collection of conflicting points of view, often selected for practical purposes without necessarily implying that one is more "true" than the other. Paradoxically, fundamentalism maintained the objectivity of "scientific truth" when this claim was no longer made by mainline science itself.

Nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints were certainly not biblical fundamentalists. Philip L. Barlow has demonstrated that, although they sincerely professed a strong general belief in the Bible,

early Mormon leaders limited the authority of the Bible by (1) promulgating an extra-biblical canon, (2) placing primacy on living prophets over received Scriptures, (3) representing Scriptures as but one source of truth among others, (4) stressing the corruptions in the received text of the Bible, and (5) dismissing portions of it as uninspired.

---

9 Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); the summary is taken from Armand L. Mauss and Philip L. Barlow, "Church, Sect,
Only in the twentieth century did the changing use of the King James Version of the Bible by Latter-day Saints exhibit some features of a Mormon "assimilation" to the Protestant (conservative) establishment. D. Michael Quinn has emphasized the importance of the "fundamentalist" attitudes (and the association with the conservative Protestant lobby during his diplomatic career) of J. Reuben Clark Jr. (1871–1961), who served as a member of the First Presidency from 1933 to 1961. Clark was instrumental in importing the fundamentalist attitudes on the Bible into Mormonism. Recent Latter-day Saint editions of the King James Version have been "Mormonized" through specific notes, but the notes, at the same time, have guided the readers toward what has been called a "fundamentalist" interpretation. While "fundamentalism" is normally used in Latter-day Saint circles to designate the splinter groups who still practice polygamy or maintain nineteenth-century views no longer regarded as orthodox by the Latter-day Saint Church, Armand Mauss has noted in the new Mormon attitudes toward the Bible one of the features showing that contemporary Mormonism is in a phase of "re­trenchment," where at both the popular and hierarchical levels, traits emerge that could be called "fundamentalist" in the usual non-Mormon sense of the term.

In contemporary Mormonism the main battle is not about the Bible. Although it would be wrong to conclude that Latter-day Saint scholars are uninformed or uninterested in non-Mormon biblical exegesis, what in other denominations is a battle for the


10 Mauss and Barlow, "Church, Sect, and Scripture," 410–11.


12 Edward H. Ashment, "Making the Scriptures "Indeed One in Our Hands,\" in The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 237–64. Of course both Vogel and Ashment are part of the contemporary "battle for the Book of Mormon" on the liberal side, and their use of the word fundamentalism has raised strong objections from conservative Mormon quarters.

Bible is in contemporary Mormonism a battle for the Book of Mormon. This battle is fought not around interpretation, but around the very nature of the Book of Mormon. Is it what it claims to be? Or is it merely a product of Joseph Smith’s creative genius or religious imagination? (Those claiming that it is neither of the two, but a fraud, exclude themselves from the debate and join the ranks of mere anti-Mormonism.) While the debate is not identical with the Protestant battle for the Bible, ultimately the question is whether the Book of Mormon—not unlike the Bible in the Protestant controversy—is “true.” Historians are more crucial to the Latter-day Saint debate than to the Protestant, for the obvious reasons that the Book of Mormon was first published in 1830 and the circumstances of its translation are more open to historical research. While the Church-approved Encyclopedia of Mormonism claims that “for most Latter-day Saints the primary purpose of scripture studies is not to prove to themselves the truth of scriptural records—which they already accept—but to gain wisdom and understanding about the teachings of these sacred writings,”14 in fact, the “truth” of the Book of Mormon may be defined in conflicting ways, and the battle for the Book of Mormon has largely become the battle for Latter-day Saint history. Accordingly, essays on Latter-day Saint historiography—such as those collected in Faithful History, published in 199215—in fact concern the battle for the Book of Mormon not less than specific studies of Latter-day Saint scripture itself.

Faithful History, including some conservative together with a majority of liberal views, was published by Signature Books. Most of the liberal authors had been published in the independent Latter-day Saint journals Dialogue or Sunstone. These journals also publish articles by conservative authors, and it would be inaccurate to claim that they have a single, if hidden, liberal agenda (the more so since Latter-day Saint liberals exhibit a whole spectrum of different nuances). Signature also published The Word of God in 199016 and New Approaches to the Book of Mormon in

---

16 Vogel, ed., The Word of God.
1993, arguably the two most controversial liberal books in the battle for the Book of Mormon. Signature was strongly criticized, to put it mildly, by conservative Latter-day Saints, one of whom—Stephen E. Robinson—went so far as to propose a parallel between the Salt Lake City press and Korihor, "the infamous "alternate voice" in the Book of Mormon," claiming that "in its continuing assault upon traditional Mormonism, Signature Books promotes . . . precisely these same naturalistic assumptions of the Korihor agenda in dealing with current Latter-day Saint beliefs." In short, "Korihor's back, and this time he's got a printing press." Robinson's criticism was published in 1991 in the Review of Books on the Book of Mormon, a publication started in 1989 by FARMS, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, based in Provo, Utah, which epitomizes the conservative (or, as it would prefer to say, orthodox) Latter-day Saint side in the battle for the Book of Mormon. The battle was not merely metaphorical, since Signature asked its attorney to write to FARMS, threatening what FARMS called "the appeal to Caesar." Undeterred, in 1994 the Review of Books on the Book of Mormon devoted an entire issue to a strongly worded attack on New Approaches to the Book of Mormon. Controversies on the Book of Mormon surely had a role in the 1993-1994 excommunications of several liberal Latter-day Saint intellectuals; Metcalfe and another of the authors of New Approaches, David P. Wright, were among those excommunicated.

It would be tempting—and the non-Mormon press has occasionally succumbed to the temptation—to label as "fundamentalists" the authors writing for FARMS publications (including the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies) and as "modernists" those published by Signature Books and by the independent Latter-day Saint journals, simply regarding the battle for the Book of Mormon as a Latter-day Saint version of the Protestant funda-

---

mentalist/modernist controversy and battle for the Bible. The comparison would, however, be only partially accurate. Of course, Latter-day Saint conservatives share with Protestant fundamentalists a commitment to sacred scriptures, to the support of denominational hierarchies, and, to some extent, to tradition. It is also probable that they would agree more readily with Protestant fundamentalists than with liberal Protestants on issues like abortion or homosexuality. On these and similar attitudes and preferences, conservative Latter-day Saints would, however, also agree with many Protestants who would never call themselves fundamentalists. More deeply, the basic epistemology of Latter-day Saint conservatives is entirely different from the fundamentalist paradigm. We have mentioned earlier that—contrary to popular prejudice—Protestant fundamentalists, according to the most recent scholarly interpretations, are in fact deeply committed to Enlightenment concepts of “objective knowledge” and “truth.” Postmodern, anti-Enlightenment epistemology is favored by their liberal counterparts. Not so in the Mormon controversy. Liberals, to start with, are staunch defenders of the Enlightenment. Edward Ashment credits the Enlightenment with having “introduced a new morality of knowledge which is similar to that of today’s scholarly world.” He approvingly quotes Van Harvey to the effect that “the Enlightenment was what one scholar has called a ‘declaration of independence against every authority that rests on the dictatorial command: Obey, don’t think.’” Of course, very few historians would agree with such a caricature of pre-Enlightenment scholarship and with the idea that the world had to await the Enlightenment to see “standards of truth and honesty” prevail. This is, however, not the point. More crucial, in order to understand the peculiarities of the Mormon controversy, is that—unlike many Protestant modernists—Latter-day Saint liberals are persuaded that, thanks to Enlightenment rationalism, an objective concept of “science” and “truth” may allow them to reach factual, empirical, “scientific” conclusions on the Book of Mormon.


and its origins. Not surprisingly, the transition from a religious to this truly secularized perspective of history and knowledge has been described by David P. Wright as a “conversion experience.” He has offered a typical conversion narrative of how he “grew up a traditional Mormon,” in college “found that many of the traditional historical assumptions that [he] held did not make sense,” and finally “by the end of [his] graduate education” came “to own the critical framework.”

On the other hand, the late modernist and postmodernist position that knowledge is by no means objective and that “true,” universally valid historical conclusions could never be reached, is held by Latter-day Saint conservatives. One of the most articulate expositions of this point of view has been advanced by David Bohn, a professor of political science at Brigham Young University. Bohn—in a 1994 Sunstone article summing up his position—argues, quoting Jacques Derrida and other postmodernist luminaries, that historical conclusions are not “true” photographs of the reality but politically negotiated narratives. When liberal historians such as D. Michael Quinn use “professionalism as a defense,” Bohn retorts that they do not seem “to understand that these methodological claims of professional historiography are precisely what are in question.” It would do no good, Bohn insists, to retreat to a moderate position where objectivists may argue that “they are only trying to approximate neutrality and objectivity.” No, “they miss the point altogether,” because “neutrality and objectivity cannot even be approximated.” Bohn denies that we could work “within some absolute universe”; we could only work “within agreed-upon universes whose boundaries and standards of measure are a product of history, defined by conventions which for one reason or another we decide to use.”

Bohn goes on to attack the Enlightenment paradigm, using the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and the hermeneutics of


25 Ibid.
Hans-Georg Gadamer. Similar arguments have been used against the same targets by Louis Midgley, a recently retired professor of political science at Brigham Young University, and are largely presupposed in many of the essays by FARMS scholars criticizing Metcalfe’s *New Approaches*. Interesting as it is, Bohn’s approach is not really typical of the position of FARMS on postmodernism. Most FARMS scholars, while remaining interested in postmodernist theories, would rather favor a more moderate approach. Conservative Latter-day Saints also often quote Peter Novick’s indictment of objectivism and positivism in American historiography. Novick is representative of a whole school of theoretical historiography claiming that “objective truth” for the historian is an objectivistic prejudice, a “noble dream” never to be achieved. Interestingly, Novick addressed Latter-day Saint intellectuals at the 1988 Sunstone Symposium.

At this stage, an outside observer expecting conservative Latter-day Saints to adopt a fundamentalist view of truth, and liberal Latter-day Saints to adopt a postmodernist one, may easily claim that something should be wrong. The attitudes are in fact almost reversed. Historical truth is regarded as a mere social product by Latter-day Saint conservatives, while a rather naive sociology of knowledge claiming that historical-critical methodologies may indeed achieve “truth” lies behind the liberals’ attitude. The “love affair with Enlightenment science” of American fundamentalists described by Marsden does not find a counterpart among Latter-day Saint conservatives; conversely, Enlightenment’s claim for certainty and objectivity is still defended in the liberal camp. It is not surprising that liberals accuse “Mormon apologists” almost of cheating.

---

26 Ibid., 53-58.
27 See, for example, Louis Midgley, “The Acids of Modernity and the Crisis in Mormon Historiography,” in *Faithful History*, 189-225.
Edward Ashment, the Enlightenment enthusiast contributing to Signature Books publications, whom FARMS prefers to describe as “a California insurance salesman who once studied Egyptology,” is suspicious of Latter-day Saint conservatives who “adopt a deconstructionist strategy when it serves their purpose” and accuses them of being “relativistic.” While accusing others of “relativistic” attitudes is a strange claim from scholars claiming to be part of the modern secular historiographic tradition, it is true that Latter-day Saint conservatives, having embraced postmodernist attitudes on the social construction of “truth,” should find a way to save the idea that the religious tenets of Mormonism are, nevertheless, “true.” At least some of them are well aware of the methodological and philosophical problems involved. First, they claim that once contemporary sociology of knowledge has proved that all scholarly enterprises are politically conditioned, they, as Bohn writes, “much prefer research in which no effort is made to hide the guiding prejudice of the writer over that which feigns neutrality.” They could also resort to “the Mormon view of God, time, and agency, . . . incompatible with traditional eschatologies and their metaphysical assumptions,” and remind us that, after all, “Mormonism does not hold that God is the final cause of every historical fact,” thus allowing for a certain contradiction both in history and in human ability to grasp historical facts. Ultimately, however, Latter-day Saint conservatives are persuaded that “the truth of the Restoration . . . stands beyond the power of secular discourse to authorize or annul.”

This position may easily be dismissed as a mere claim to faith and probably would be regarded as such by many scholars socialized in the secular tradition. It is, however, not unique. While conservative Latter-day Saints use Gadamer and Husserl, other religious scholars, including Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, one of the most prominent scholars in the Catholic Church before becoming one of the main officers in that denomination, have used the ideas

33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 52.
of Karl Popper and his school in order to claim that science, both
natural and social, does not produce “truth” but only provisional
theories capable of being “falsified” by subsequent and better,
though still provisional, new theories.\(^{35}\) Within this frame, science
remains of course an important tool of knowledge, but its truth
claims are somewhat bracketed. Although the late Sir Karl Popper
may have thought otherwise, Ratzinger and other religious schol­
ers have proposed that the argument is only valid with respect to
secular science, while religion is situated in an entirely different
domain where the Popperian paradigm is not applicable. Ulti­
mately, such use of Popper (or, in a different context, Gadamer) is
premised on general metaphysical and theological options which
are, in turn, difficult to evaluate in terms of “true” or “false.” At
any rate—although secular scholars probably do not care to read
it—there is a rich religious literature confronting the question of
truth and arguing that “true” or “false” are still meaningful la­
nels in the field of theology and religion in a postmodernist world
where they have lost their meaning (and rightly so, this literature
claims) in both natural and social sciences. In the Evangelical
field, Professor Harold A. Netland has used similar arguments in
favor of “Christian exclusivism” against relativist theologians
such as Paul Knitter or Wilfred Cantwell Smith.\(^{36}\) In the Roman
Catholic world the absolute value of religious truth in a
postmodern world has been forcefully argued by Pope John Paul
II in the most philosophically oriented of his encyclicals, Veritatis
Splendor (“The Splendor of Truth Shines”) of 1993. Again,
both Evangelical texts such as Netland’s and Veritatis Splendor
are not “fundamentalist” in any sense of the word. Fundamen­
talists, in fact, do not even bother to entertain the question of truth
and would not accept the idea that modern social sciences

---

\(^{35}\) Hugh W. Nibley has cited Karl Popper on a number of occasions, i.e.,
in *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS,
1987), 275, and in *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book

\(^{36}\) Harold A. Netland, *Dissentant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the
and Protestant theologians the liberal point of view denying the existence of an
absolute religious “truth” has been popularized by Paul F. Knitter, *No Other
Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions*
(Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985).
(including the sociology of science) have deconstructed the notion of "truth" with respect to our knowledge of both nature and history. As we mentioned earlier, fundamentalists in general are rather entrenched in the defense of a general objectivistic paradigm of knowledge and would claim that "legitimate" or "good" science is still capable of letting us know the "objective truth."  

On the question of truth and the respective claims of science (natural and historical) and religion, Latter-day Saint conservatives are more similar to Catholic and moderate Evangelical conservatives than to fundamentalists. They have, however, two problems that Latter-day Saint intellectuals, liberal and conservative alike, will probably be compelled to explore more deeply in years to come. The first problem is peculiar to Mormonism. The Evangelical, and conservative Catholic, claim for religious truth in the age of postmodernity ultimately appeals to a theological premise connected with the sovereignty of an omnipotent God. "Truth" in religion is a participation of the absolute truth of God. It has been argued that the Latter-day Saint concept of a limited God does not allow for such claims. If God is limited, theological "truth" should be not less provisional than historical or scientific "truth" as restricted by postmodern criticism. This argument has been advanced by anti-Mormons such as Latayne C. Scott in a rather trivial way, mentioning the Latter-day Saint "open canon," the appeal to the "burning in the bosom" and even the exaggerations of Elder Paul H. Dunn as evidence that Latter-day Saints do not really believe in "truth." Not all anti-Mormons, however, present their case in such a simplistic way. Francis J. Beckwith, a lecturer on philosophy at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, has argued more astutely against any possible claim for an absolute truth in Mormonism starting from the Latter-day Saint concept.

---


of a limited God. Ultimately, I personally am not impressed by Beckwith’s arguments, but perhaps they deserve a closer scrutiny.

A second problem is common to Latter-day Saint and other Christian conservatives. Is the epistemological argument premised on Gadamer, Popper, or postmodernism in touch with what the average, everyday Church members really feel and think? Common folks in the pews not only, of course, ignore or are unaware of the very names of the likes of Gadamer or Popper, but are probably persuaded that both science (including social science and history) and religion produce “truth,” without being aware of the semantic differences between the respective concepts of “truth” in religion and science.

Postmodernist defenses of Christianity, or Mormonism, may well remain of limited sociological relevance insofar as the average Church member is not even aware of problems with the “truth” that history or science may offer. Postmodernist approaches to the “truth” of religion, the Bible, or the Book of Mormon are not, however, anachronistic. Sociological inquiries tell us that even among professionals, such as computer operators and medical doctors, belief in witchcraft and magic is growing. Popular faith in science is decreasing and approaching, in countries like Italy, what is probably an all-time low. Postmodernity as a reaction to the Enlightenment paradigm is becoming more socially relevant. In this context Gadamer may not become a household name, but the possibility that science (including history) may produce “truth” safer than that produced by religion will be increasingly questioned. And, if the socialization of the


42 See, for a comment based on data from southern Italy, Luigi Berzano and Massimo Introvigne, *La sfida infinita* (Sicily: Salvatore Sciascia Editore, 1994).
postmodern paradigm advances, conservatives will enjoy a tactical advantage over liberals in future stages of the battle for the Book of Mormon.

2. A Non-Mormon Perspective

Although it is obvious that the Book of Mormon has its peculiarities and its interpretation is both similar and dissimilar from the interpretation of the Bible, I believe that it may be useful to compare the Latter-day Saint approach to the Book of Mormon with the Roman Catholic approach to the Bible. The Roman Catholic Church is, in fact, different from the Protestant churches insofar as it teaches that the Bible is not the only source of the Faith and that it coexists with the Tradition interpreted by the infallible magisterium of Rome. While the Catholic canon is closed in contrast to the open Latter-day Saint canon, it is perhaps not entirely inappropriate to compare (not to identify) the Catholic infallible magisterium with the living prophets in the Latter-day Saint Church. In both churches the relationship between a living magisterium and the scriptural canon should be continuously negotiated. Accordingly, the Roman Catholic approach to the Bible may offer an interesting comparison for the Latter-day Saint approach to the Book of Mormon. Perhaps the approach by the Church hierarchy (conveniently—even if not always appropriately—summarized by the expression “the Vatican”) is more interesting than the approach by professional Bible scholars. The latter are today socialized into a professional tradition including Catholic, mainline Protestant, and secular scholars and may ignore the problem of the coexistence of the Bible as a source of authority in Catholicism with the Tradition and the magisterium altogether. Without this coexistence, however, the Catholic Church would not exist as a distinctive community.

According to Pope John Paul II, two key documents by the magisterium have appeared on the Catholic approach to the Bible (apart, of course, from the constitution Dei Verbum of Vatican II). The first is the encyclical Providentissimus Deus, published by

---

Pope Leo XIII in 1893. John Paul II acknowledges that the purpose of his predecessor was “especially to protect Catholic interpretation of the Bible from the attacks of rationalistic science.” Providentissimus appeared in a period marked by vicious polemics against the Church’s faith. Liberal exegesis gave important support to these polemics, for it made use of all scientific resources, from textual criticism to geology, including philology, literary criticism, history of religions, archeology and other disciplines besides.⁴⁴

Against this offensive “one could have reacted by anathematizing the use of science in biblical interpretation.” John Paul II attests that Providentissimus, however, “did not take this route” and rather tried to disassociate legitimate science from “preconceived opinions that claim to be based on science, but which in reality surreptitiously cause science to depart from its domain.”⁴⁵ One result was, however, in the subsequent fifty years (1893–1943), a growing Catholic interest in the so-called “mystical” exegesis, which scorned science in favour of experience and spirituality. The Church reacted with another important encyclical, Divino afflante Spiritu, published by Pope Pius XII in 1943. Divino, in turn, could have simply condemned the wild use of mysticism and “spiritual” interpretations, suggesting to take more seriously the historical-critical method, by then largely used by Catholic scholars. According to John Paul II, however, “Pius XII deliberately avoided this approach.” On the contrary he emphasized “the close unity of the two approaches,” historical-critical and spiritual: each cannot deny the legitimacy of the other. John Paul II’s conclusion is that Providentissimus and Divino,

---

⁴⁴ John Paul II, “Address on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” 23 April 1993. The address, given to commemorate the centenary of Providentissimus Deus and the fiftieth anniversary of Divino afflante Spiritu, has been republished as an introduction to The Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” English ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 7–21; quotation from 9.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.
despite the great difference in the difficulties they had to face, ... are in complete agreement at the deepest level. Both of them reject a split between the human and the divine, between scientific research and respect for the faith, between the literal sense and the spiritual sense. 46

This middle ground was reiterated by Vatican II in Dei Verbum. In 1993—one hundred years after Providentissimus and fifty years after Divino—the Pope asked the Pontifical Biblical Commission to prepare a new position paper on the status of biblical interpretation in the Church. The report—“The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church”—is not, strictly speaking, an official document of the Catholic magisterium. The Commission subsequent to Vatican II is not an organ of the teaching office [magisterium], but rather a commission of scholars who, in their scientific and ecclesiastical responsibility as believing exegetes, take positions on important problems of scriptural interpretation and know that for this task they enjoy the confidence of the teaching office. 47

That it is not a document of the magisterium is clearly reflected by the mention of a dissenting opinion on one point (on the “feminist approach” to the Bible) within the Commission. 48 On the other hand—legalities aside—the document was published with an endorsement by the Pope who recommended it as an “excellent work” 49 and with a “Preface” by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the highest authority in the Roman Catholic Church in matters of faith and doctrine. Accordingly, the document could safely be taken as representing the present position of the Catholic hierarchy on biblical interpretation. I will discuss its general

---

46 Ibid., 11.
structure and its possible relevance for the present controversies on the Book of Mormon.

The two parts of the document are premised on a distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics. Exegesis tries to collect as much information as possible about the text, while hermeneutics offers more on the relationship between the text and its readers. It is important, according to the document, not to confuse questions of exegesis and hermeneutics. Hans Georg Gadamer (as well as Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur, all mentioned in the Latter-day Saint controversy) is quoted as enormously relevant for hermeneutics, but relevant for exegesis only as far as the latter is in "absolute necessity of hermeneutical theory" for "a broader model of interpretation." The first part of the document examines six styles or traditions of exegesis. All are (partially) acceptable, but none of them is "neutral"; they are based on philosophical and theological presuppositions. These presuppositions should be identified, and some of them should be exposed as incompatible with the Christian faith. The fact that the philosophical presuppositions of most approaches are not acceptable does not automatically imply that all the conclusions reached by scholars within these traditions should be rejected. They should be carefully analyzed, and the identification of their hidden philosophical agenda should help the reader not to regard each approach as "true" or universally valid, but as a component of a more complex picture.

The first approach examined by the document is the historical-critical method that studies "the historical processes which gave rise to biblical texts," by comparing manuscripts, submitting texts to linguistic and semantic analysis, using the knowledge derived from historical philology, considering the literary genres and the personality of the biblical writers involved. According to the Commission, if we want a "proper understanding" of the Bible, the historical-critical method is "indispensable." On the other hand, Christians could not ignore that scholars using the historical-critical method are consciously or unconsciously socialized into a tradition dominated by rationalism and secularism.

——— 50 The Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," 75.
This tradition has often been reductionist: trying to reduce the biblical text to its context. Although the historical-critical method remains somewhat necessary, the Catholic scholar should correct the reductionist trends of its tradition “through the application of a more diversified semantics.”\textsuperscript{51} These comments seem to be relevant for the discussion on the Book of Mormon. Some liberal Latter-day Saint scholars have insisted on the application of the historical-critical method as the only method of legitimate “scientific” interpretation.\textsuperscript{52} When applied to the Book of Mormon, the historical-critical method normally means that the activities of Joseph Smith connected with the translation and publication of the text should be considered, usually within the context of his time. Some liberal Latter-day Saints, as we mentioned earlier, describe their “conversion” to the historical-critical method as a transforming experience and seem to believe that it is the only method accepted today by the scholarly community. As the Catholic document of 1993 emphasizes, this is not the case. When dealing with the Book of Mormon we could perhaps agree that the use of a historical-critical method is not less “indispensable” than when dealing with the Bible. The circumstances connected with its translation and publication are not irrelevant, but very relevant, and historians have a very legitimate task to perform. On the other hand, Latter-day Saint scholars could not ignore the agenda of most historical-critical scholars with its rationalistic and secularist prejudices. In order not to become a victim of these prejudices, the best thing Latter-day Saint scholars can do is not to regard the historical-critical method as “the” final and “true” method to approach the Book of Mormon. This method could, however, be extremely useful, particularly when its results are not taken uncritically at face value but are submitted to the examination of an appropriate sociology of knowledge, capable of dealing with them in light of their methodological presuppositions.

Above all, it is important to realize that within the field of exegesis (to be coordinated, additionally, with the parallel field of hermeneutics) the historical-critical method is not the only method adopted in modern scholarship: “The historical-critical

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 40.

\textsuperscript{52} See Wright, “Historical Criticism.”
method cannot claim to be totally sufficient. . . . It necessarily has to leave aside many aspects of the writings which it studies. It is not surprising, then, that at the present time, other methods and approaches are proposed which serve to explore more profoundly other aspects worthy of attention.”53 The second approach examined by the Vatican document uses “new methods of literary analysis,” including rhetorical analysis, narrative analysis or narratology, and semiotic analysis. These methods read the text as a coherent whole, without considering immediately the historical context. Again, more often than not, this approach is conditioned by the prevailing philosophy in its tradition, structuralism. It should be used as carefully as the historical-critical method but, showing that the text is “obedient to a precise linguistic mechanic of operation,” it contributes to “our understanding of the . . . Word of God expressed in human language.”54

The third approach discussed in the 1993 Catholic document regards the biblical texts as flowing from one great tradition, considering each text within the context of scripture as a whole, comparing the interpretation of the text in Jewish and Christian exegesis and its reading in the history of the community. The relevance of this approach for the Book of Mormon should be obvious if one considers the historical nature of the Latter-day Saint faith. Again—without immediately going back to historical-critical problems—one could examine how the Book of Mormon (perhaps in comparison with the Bible) has been read by the Latter-day Saint community throughout its history, obtaining results no serious scholar would today regard as irrelevant for the meaning of the text itself.


54 The Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” 49. Within these limits it seems that rhetoric, narrative, and semiotic analysis of the Book of Mormon (some examples have been produced by the faculty at Brigham Young University and by FARMS itself) could be useful to develop a better understanding of the Book of Mormon as a text, without being immediately drawn to historical-critical problems.
The fourth tradition studied by the Vatican document includes the "approaches based on the human sciences": sociology, anthropology, psychology, and psychoanalysis. Here the risk of reductionism is of course apparent: each human science could easily argue that the biblical text could be reduced to its sociological, ethnoanthropological, or psychological contexts. This reductionism is today a serious problem in the Catholic Church—witness the problems caused in Germany by the disciplined theologian Eugen Drewermann—particularly in respect to psychological reductionism. One of the problems is the lack of a "single form" of psychological exegesis. In fact, "proceeding from the different fields of psychology and from the various schools of thought, there exists a whole range of approaches" and "to absolutize one or other of the approaches taken by the various schools of psychology and psychoanalysis would not serve to make collaborative efforts [with biblical theology] in this area more fruitful, but rather render it harmful."55 With this caution, sociology, ethnology, anthropology, and psychology could always help in understanding a text, particularly when it is—as sacred scriptures often are—expressed in symbolic forms open to a psychological reading and since it was originally offered by Joseph Smith to a community of believers with its sociological and ethnological features. Psychological reductionism has often been mentioned in Book of Mormon controversies, and it seems that a balanced approach may be useful in this field in order not to destroy the meaning of the text as scripture through an inappropriate reductionism, while not renouncing the additional insights that psychology (and other human sciences) may offer.

The fifth tradition considered by the Vatican document includes "contextual approaches," either politically or gender-oriented. Politically oriented readings of the scriptures have been proposed mostly by liberation theology; they may—according to the document—"include elements of undoubted value" but also involve "some risks" when liberation theology is connected to "the Marxist principle of the class struggle." The feminist approach to the Bible was a sensitive topic in the Pontifical Biblical Commission, and eight of the nineteen members of the Commiss-

55 Ibid., 63.
sion recorded their dissent to the final text, which reads that 
"feminist exegesis has brought many benefits" correcting 
"certain commonly accepted interpretations which were tenden-
tious and sought to justify male domination of women." On the 
other hand, "feminist exegesis, to the extent that it proceeds from 
a preconceived judgement, runs the risk of interpreting the bibli-
cal texts in a tendentious and thus debatable manner. . . . Feminist 
exegesis can be useful to the Church only to the degree that it 
does not fall into the very traps it denounces."56 It is interesting 
to note that contextual approaches, both liberationist and feminist, 
could work independent of the historical-critical method. While 
there are not many examples of a politically oriented reading of 
the Book of Mormon (although applications to controversial 
contemporary issues are not entirely absent), a feminist theology 
has been proposed by Latter-day Saint liberals and is featured in 
the Signature Books catalogue.57 As the very attitude of the Vati-
can Commission shows, there is no way to make feminist exegesis 
of sacred scriptures less controversial. In the Latter-day Saint de-
bate, a feminist reading of the Book of Mormon has probably 
been combined with a secularizing use of the historical-critical 
method, thus adding fuel to the fire of controversy. As the Catho-
lic document shows, a feminist reading of sacred scriptures not 
associated with the objectivist claims of the historical-critical 
method (and, as a consequence, not claiming to offer "true" or 
"scientific" interpretations of the scriptures, but only a point of 
view) may more easily find some sort of acceptance.

The sixth tradition examined by the Pontifical Biblical Com-
mission is fundamentalism. The document judiciously observes 
that there is not only one fundamentalism. There is an extreme 
fundamentalism that "actually invites people to a kind of intel-
lectual suicide." On the other hand, a more moderate funda-
mentalism may be the "right to insist on the divine inspiration of 
the Bible, the inerrancy of the Word of God, and other biblical 
truths included in [the] five fundamental points [of the American

56 Ibid., 68–69.
57 See Maxine Hanks, ed., Women and Authority: Re-Emerging Mormon 
Feminism (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992). Maxine Hanks was excom-
municated in 1993.
Biblical Congress held at Niagara, New York, in 1895). While fundamentalism as a method is not acceptable, it is not unaccept­
able to look in the scriptures to abstract from them some non-
eggotiable “fundamentals” and defend them vigorously against any secularizing attempt. This approach may rightly define the traditional mainline Latter-day Saint position toward the Book of Mormon. As we mentioned earlier, fundamentalism in the technical sense of the term is foreign to Latter-day Saint culture, but nonnegotiable “fundamentals” are clearly defended by the Latter-day Saint hierarchy (as by any other Christian hierarchy, except the very liberal ones in contemporary Protestantism). On the other hand, what Armand Mauss has called “folk fundamentalism,” influenced by Protestant fundamentalism, is growing at the grassroots level in the Latter-day Saint Church, and may import into contemporary popular Mormonism elements foreign to its own history and tradition.

The second part of the document “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” deals with hermeneutics. It is remarkable that a semiofficial document by the largest Christian denomination takes seriously modern philosophical hermeneutics and discusses Gadamer’s position at length. Gadamer’s idea (much quoted, as we have seen, in the Latter-day Saint debate) that “anti­
cipations and preconceptions affecting our understanding stem from the tradition which carries us” is quoted approvingly. The document then examines Gadamer’s idea of hermeneutics as a dialectical process, based on *Horizontverschmelzung* (the fusion of the differing horizons of text and reader) and Zugehörigkeit (“belonging” as a fundamental affinity between the interpreter and his or her object). Since both literary and historical criticisms are necessary but not sufficient, in the scholarly context of post-

---

60 Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive*.
modernity the Commission notes “the absolute necessity of a hermeneutical theory which allows for the incorporation of the methods of literary and historical criticism within a broader model of interpretation.” “All exegesis . . . is thus summoned to make itself fully complete through a ‘hermeneutics’ understood in this modern [i.e., Gadamer’s] sense.”62 Entering directly into controversies not unfamiliar to the Latter-day Saint community, the Vatican Commission states that “contemporary hermeneutics is a healthy reaction to historical positivism and to the temptation to apply to the study of the Bible the purely objective criteria used in the natural sciences.” On the other hand, the Commission thinks that hermeneutics still needs exegesis. Hermeneutics entirely detached from historical and literary studies may generate “purely subjective readings.”63 This criticism is not far from the warnings of Umberto Eco (a deeply secular author and one not quoted in the Vatican document) that interpretation has its limits, and some postmodernists at times seem to claim that simply any interpretation would do.64 Eco’s book is interesting since its criticism is not only aimed at literary and philosophical postmodernism, but also at the esoterical tradition that has in turn influenced many points of view on religion. Eco’s criticism, of course, is valid only when applied to the more radical postmodernist theories, particularly of the deconstructionist variety, while it would be unfair to argue that the more moderate approaches favored by both conservative Catholics and Latter-day Saints are uninterested in the question of truth. Perhaps the most important difference between the radical and the moderate postmodernist theories is their starting point. Radical postmodernists start from philosophy and regard their theories as new epistemological insights universally valid. Moderate postmodernists assume as their starting point the historical and sociological fact of the current crisis of popular faith in reason and science—postmodernity, for them, is first of all a historical event—and look for an epistemological and hermeneutical perspective to make sense of this changed climate.

62 Ibid., 75.
63 Ibid., 77.
64 See Umberto Eco, I limiti dell’interpretazione (Milan: Bompiani, 1990); also published in English as The Limits of Interpretation (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990).
I have examined at length the Vatican document of 1993 since I regard it as a fair and balanced assessment of the contemporary mainline Catholic position on the Bible (although neither archconservatives nor archliberals in the Catholic Church would readily agree with it). Of course, it would be inappropriate from a nonmember to offer suggestions to the Latter-day Saint community on how to deal with the present Book of Mormon controversies. It is perhaps less inappropriate for the non-Mormon scholar, however, to offer comparisons with what is being culturally negotiated in other Christian communities. The Roman Catholic experience may offer a useful comparative perspective on at least three points.

First, it could show that it is naive to claim that the historical-critical method is the only method acceptable to approach the text of a sacred scripture. Exegesis in the contemporary, scholarly sense of the word is larger than the historical-critical method, and also includes other methods (literary analysis, approaches based on tradition and community, studies based on the human sciences, contextual approaches both liberationist and feminist) which could work to some extent independently from historical criticism. It is also useful to remember that the historical-critical method is often packaged with all the elements of a secularizing tradition inherently hostile to religion and the supernatural. It would seem that at the exegetical level a better understanding of the Book of Mormon could take advantage of studies based on approaches other than the historical-critical method, where the problems of the historical criticism may be temporarily set aside. Each method, of course, should be in turn considered, taking into account its own inherent limitations and the agenda of those who propose it in the scholarly community. This seems to be particularly true for psychological, psychoanalytical, and feminist interpretations. Fundamentalism, in turn, is equally foreign to the Roman Catholic and Latter-day Saint traditions, but there is one point where its message deserves to be heard, when it insists that some “fundamentals” should remain nonnegotiable by scholars if a church should avoid the risk of collapsing altogether.

Second, the historical-critical method—when approached by knowing what it is and what the agenda, or agendas, of many of its proponents may include—remains useful. No appeal to herme-
neutics could make historical and critical studies on Joseph Smith and how the Book of Mormon was translated and published in the nineteenth century irrelevant (these studies, of course, would include attempts to determine what "translation," in this context, may mean). Hermeneutics without exegesis risks to offer what Eco calls "the infinite interpretation,"\(^65\) a sequel of subjective claims no less destructive to a Christian community than the naive surrender to historical-critical exclusivism and to its claim to generate "true" and "objective" reconstructions. As long as they do not claim to be able to offer universally valid "truths" capable either of debunking or confirming the religious claims of a sacred scripture, historical-critical studies remain useful to establish any psychological, symbolic, or contextual exegesis (and, to some extent, any hermeneutical effort) on a firmer ground.

Third, although "pure" hermeneutics without exegesis would run the risk of extreme subjectivism (and was not even advocated by Gadamer), ultimately hermeneutics is crucial. It is, after all, in the hermeneutic circle of *Horizontverschmelzung* and *Zugehörigkeit* that each of us will encounter a sacred text, hear the text's and God's voice, and decide what attitude we want to take toward the narrative. Exegesis is needed by hermeneutics in order that this crucial decision is not uninformed, purely subjective, or merely emotional. On the other hand, exegesis should be modest enough not to pretend to break the hermeneutic circle and leave us with only one alternative. Sciences, including social and religious sciences, could only debunk the totalitarian claims (and, at the same time, confirm the relative value) of each tradition and approach, leading us to the center of the hermeneutic circle. When we are there, we are alone with ourselves and God, and no science could decide for us.

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 326 (Italian ed.).