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“Inspiring” but Not True: An Added Glimpse of the RLDS Stance on the Book of Mormon

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Since the late 1960s RLDS “liberals” have argued that the Book of Mormon should not be read as an authentic ancient history. This novel reading of the Book of Mormon has been part of a sustained effort by the RLDS hierarchy to make the Reorganization conform more closely with Protestant liberal approaches to the Bible. I demonstrate that the RLDS hierarchy has encouraged changes in the way the Book of Mormon is read by RLDS intellectuals. I then examine the arguments of Roger Launius, currently the foremost RLDS historian, who has recently insisted that the Book of Mormon ought to be read as “inspiring” frontier fiction. I also describe and criticize his claim that any concern with the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon is not serious historical scholarship, which he wants focused on issues currently fashionable among secularized historians.
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Abstract: Since the late 1960s RLDS "liberals" have argued that the Book of Mormon should not be read as an authentic ancient history. This novel reading of the Book of Mormon has been part of a sustained effort by the RLDS hierarchy to make the Reorganization conform more closely with Protestant liberal approaches to the Bible. I demonstrate that the RLDS hierarchy has encouraged changes in the way the Book of Mormon is read by RLDS intellectuals. I then examine the arguments of Roger Launius, currently the foremost RLDS historian, who has recently insisted that the Book of Mormon ought to be read as "inspiring" frontier fiction. I also describe and criticize his claim that any concern with the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon is not serious historical scholarship, which he wants focused on issues currently fashionable among secularized historians.

An RLDS "liberal" faction has made a determined effort to read the Book of Mormon as a modern, rather than ancient, text. In an earlier essay I described this change in understanding the Book of Mormon as a key component of what I called "The Radical Reformation of the Reorganization of the Restoration."  

Fundamental shifts in the way the Book of Mormon is understood have been an integral part of a larger pattern of radical alterations that have been going on within the RLDS community since the late 1960s.\(^2\)

In this essay I will first examine evidence that seems to show that RLDS leaders were responsible for the efforts to transform the way their followers are now being urged to read the scriptures, including especially the Book of Mormon, and I will then examine one more example of how an RLDS historian explains and justifies such a revisionist reading.

Former RLDS officials sometimes maintain that changes in their community just happened without anyone in leadership positions having planned them. Some striking evidence that this claim is simply not true is now available. But, for what seems like essentially public relations purposes, these former officials tend to downplay the radical nature of the changes they both allowed and encouraged since the late 1960s. And they dance around the question of how they wanted their followers to read the Book of Mormon.

Beginning in the 1960s a few Latter-day Saint writers cautiously hinted that they thought Joseph Smith had somehow fashioned the Book of Mormon out of ideas floating around his immediate sectarian environment.\(^3\) These writers have been shy and retiring, not bold and adventuresome. And even when they had no use for the Book of Mormon, they did not attempt to fashion arguments against it, since in their opinion it was obviously not


authentic. One such writer, Sterling McMurrin, even boasted that he had never read the entire book.4 These few writers managed to see themselves as "Mormon" in some sentimental and cultural sense. They never had official encouragement for their views.

It has only been since the 1980s that a few writers on the fringes of the Latter-day Saint intellectual community have begun insisting that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints should stop maintaining that the Book of Mormon is authentic history.5 These efforts have not had official support. In fact, just the opposite. Several who have toyed with such a revisionist reading have either lost their membership in or have withdrawn from the church.6 Some of these writers, much like the RLDS, have argued that the Book of Mormon may contain some interesting and perhaps even "inspiring" teachings, even if it is merely frontier fiction written by Joseph Smith. This argument did not originate with Latter-day Saints.

It was RLDS "liberals" who (with official encouragement, as I will demonstrate) began in 1968 to argue that it might be possible to find something "inspiring" in the Book of Mormon when it is read as fiction—as a nineteenth-century fable or an extended parable—fashioned by Joseph Smith and hence not as an authentic ancient history.7 In 1967 the RLDS hierarchy decided, as part of their plan to bring the Reorganization into what they understood as the twentieth century, to encourage the notion that the Book of Mormon should be read as something like an

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4 For this astonishing boast, see Matters of Conscience: Conversations with Sterling M. McMurrin on Philosophy, Education, and Religion, ed. L. Jackson Newell (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 114; cf. 13, 19–21, 24, 77, 108, 194, 210–11, 368–69, for other similar and related remarks.


6 David P. Wright and Brent Metcalfe are the best-known examples, both having made a public fuss over their excommunications.

7 See the influential essay by Wayne Ham entitled "Problems in Interpreting the Book of Mormon as History," Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action 1/1 (1970): 15–22. Courage was a "liberal" RLDS magazine that appeared briefly in the 1970s. Ham's essay was originally part of what were called Position Papers (Independence, Mo.: Cumorah Books, 1968), 103–12, although he was not identified as its author in that publication. The Position Papers were officially endorsed reinterpretations of traditional RLDS positions and were offered as part of a curriculum "liberalization" undertaken in 1968 by RLDS clergy with the support of presiding officials.
extended parable—an exotic example of religiously interesting frontier fiction. In public they were more or less silent on the matter, encouraging others to make the point for them.

A number of RLDS employees were already anxious to advance revisionist stances. After World War II many of the RLDS professional clergy received training in liberal Protestant divinity schools where they were indoctrinated in the latest fads in liberal biblical criticism. This indoctrination prepared them to read the Book of Mormon as fiction. Their reasoning was based on the way they had been indoctrinated to read the Bible. They drew the conclusion that, if liberal biblical critics could argue, for example, that Jesus of Nazareth was not resurrected because dead bodies simply do not come back to life, and that much of what is taught in the New Testament is mythological fable rather than historical fact, then something like that could also be said about the Book of Mormon. In this way, they argued, what was seen as mythological, and hence objectionable, could be demythologized and thereby somehow made more acceptable to those who have an essentially naturalistic worldview. The RLDS leadership could thus count on a number of individuals who would advance highly secularized accounts of divine things. All this is well-known.

But the story does not end there. In 1967 the highest RLDS leaders sought similar instruction. They went to W. Paul Jones, then an ordained United Methodist minister and philosophical theologian at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri, “for help in ‘entering the twentieth century,’ especially theologically.” Jones has recently described “what happened in the training sessions that followed” the request by RLDS leadership for his help. “The unspoken result,” according to Jones, “was that increasingly the literal uniqueness of the RLDS tradition came to be seen as ‘broken myth’ (Tillich). Whatever truth might remain in that tradition would have to be symbolic, not literal.”

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10 Ibid., 5. Paul Tillich, a prominent German-American philosophical theologian, was a popular intellectual icon in America immediately after World War II.
such a proposition seems to follow from subsequent published explanations of the Book of Mormon that turned both it and the story of its recovery into a fable or myth in need of being deliteralized and demythologized.

Professor Jones now believes that the RLDS leadership and "liberal" clergy have gone too far in their efforts to deliteralize and demythologize the restoration. But it is clear that part of the resulting "liberalization," if that is the appropriate word, includes an effort to read the Book of Mormon as a modern book and to see in it merely some moral sentiments rather than historical fact and divine revelation. This explains why after 1968 the RLDS leadership allowed essays rejecting the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon.11

Roger Launius, who is chief historian with the NASA History Office in Washington, D.C., and, I believe, currently the leading RLDS historian, holds that the Book of Mormon contains a "strong Christology."12 He also likes its depiction of "a cyclical pattern of covenant-righteousness-turning from the gospel-falling away-covenanting anew." These teachings, he opines, make "a powerful statement of humanity's worth in a world where human worth is everywhere questioned."13 But he also flatly denies that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient history. And he thinks it a waste of time for Mormon historians to focus any

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13 Ibid.
attention on the question of the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Why?

According to Launius, both "Mormon and non-Mormon scholars have debated the . . . origins of the Book of Mormon back and forth ad nauseam for a half century without resolution." He also claims that, "to a very real extent, the conclusion reached" in the debate over the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon "is based on whether one is a believing member of the church and not on evidence." Launius holds that, "like attorneys arguing a case, each side [in this debate] amasses evidence to either buttress or destroy the foundations of the Book of Mormon as ancient scripture, convincing only those who already hold preconceptions in that direction." It is not clear how he knows this to be the case. Be that as it may, he brushes aside the entire debate over the historical authenticity on the grounds that it rests on what he calls a "heavy-handed either/or approach." He pleads for what he calls "a more 'catholic' middle position" on the Book of Mormon that would still emphasize its "powerful message for the present-day LDS church and the world as a whole," while reading it as a nineteenth-century fable fashioned by Joseph Smith. This so-called middle-position turns out to involve a flat rejection of the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon, while maintaining that it still has some appealing teachings.

Launius sets forth his stance on the Book of Mormon in the following way:

Recently, a few Mormon historians have begun to get away from the either/or type of questions about the Book of Mormon. . . . For instance, while the historicity of the Book of Mormon has been under attack from without since nearly the beginning of the church . . . in some form or another, concern for finding a way

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14 Ibid., 206.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 219.
17 Ibid., 209. At this point in his argument Launius cites essays by Wayne Ham and William D. Russell. They merely suggest that some language found in the Book of Mormon still might be appealing to some of the Saints when the book is read as an extended parable or fable. However, it is not clear that either of them find anything attractive in the Book of Mormon.
to deal with the book as a non-historical sacred text has become increasingly visible. 18

By "non-historical" Launius clearly means that the Book of Mormon should not be read as authentic "ancient scripture," but it can still be read as a "sacred text." But he also grants that "some of those questioning the book's historical origins have suggested that the church should formally repudiate the Book of Mormon." 19 Launius also claims that

many people wisely have suggested that this is throwing out the baby with the bath water. Contrary to the position of . . . traditional Latter-day Saints that the Book of Mormon must be an authentic history of a . . . group of ancient peoples in America or it must be a hoax, a more "catholic" middle position can be adopted. 20

He does not indicate who these many people are other than to cite recent RLDS critics of the Book of Mormon and one book published by Signature Books that contains essays by a few cultural Mormons and former Latter-day Saints. 21

Launius wants to keep the Book of Mormon as a "sacred text" because he thinks that it contains some nice "theology," but nothing approaching authentic history. He thus distinguishes what he calls "theology" from history. And he is troubled by what he thinks has been an unfortunate confusion between history and theology that is at the very core of the restoration. He claims it is a mistake to seek to "buttress their validity as religious institutions through their history." To do that cripples historical inquiry by leading to efforts to answer "questions that are inappropriate for history to begin with and distorted beyond validity," 22 whatever that means.

18 Launius, "From Old to New Mormon History," 208.
19 Ibid., 209.
20 Ibid.
21 He has in mind the collection of ten essays edited by Brent Lee Metcalfe entitled New Approaches to the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993). Launius simply ignores the numerous criticisms of this book that followed its publication.
22 Launius, "From Old to New Mormon History," 201.
Since, according to Launius, historians "are by definition concerned with the human condition," they are in no position to answer the question of whether the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text (or the question of whether Joseph Smith actually saw "God and Jesus Christ in a first vision" or invented "the story after the fact to legitimate his religious work"). The question of whether the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text "is ill-suited to analysis by historians," and also, according to Launius, "both far less interesting and significant than a related one: What kind of religion is it that Smith brought into being and how did the first vision relate to it?" Thus his "more 'catholic' middle position" requires the Mormon historian to turn away from the question of whether the Book of Mormon is true and focus instead on questions that are presumably more interesting to everyone, except to the believer or potential believer.

Launius does not want the RLDS to repudiate the Book of Mormon; he only wants historians to cease asking whether it is true. But to reach this position he has to assume that it cannot possibly be what it claims to be; he has to assume that critics have somehow settled the question of its authenticity. But notice that even to reject it as history, which is what he does, is to accept the possibility that historians can say something about its authenticity as history, which is what he seems to deny on the grounds that such a question is "ill-suited to analysis by historians who are by definition concerned with the human condition." The stance taken by Launius is thus muddled.

Though Launius does not want the Book of Mormon read as an authentic ancient history, he still wants it retained as a "sacred text." But this entails that he not be opposed to disposing of the traditional understanding that Joseph Smith was visited by angels and so forth. If historians cannot say anything about sacred matters, if they are, as he says, "by definition" prevented from advancing opinions on sacred matters, then they should say exactly nothing about prophetic truth claims; they should not dogmatically assume that prophetic truth claims are false. They should at least leave such questions open, which is exactly what Launius

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
refuses to do. Why? Is it that he believes that unless historians can finally resolve historical issues, they have no business investigating them? Is it that the stakes are too high for mere historians to be dabbling in questions involving prophetic truth claims? Does he not see that arguing that the Book of Mormon is “a non-historical sacred text” is accepting the proposition that Joseph Smith was not a genuine prophet? And to take that position is to take a stand on what are clearly historical matters. So it turns out that his “more ‘catholic’ middle position” is merely a way of brushing aside, without confronting the crucial issues, the story that has constituted the content and grounds of the faith and memory of Latter-day Saints.

What Launius rejects is what he describes as “the either-or type of questions about the Book of Mormon.”26 Those who focus on whether it is either an authentic ancient history or a nineteenth-century fable are accused of having a “myopic concern with Mormon origins.” From his position this is the result of the fact that “Latter-day Saints do not so much have a theology as they have a history.” He is, of course, right about this. The faith of Latter-day Saints is not the product of the kind of speculation that has traditionally been known as “theology,” the speculation about the divine flowing from a philosophical culture. The Saints have always looked to events, to accounts of actual encounters with God, for their understanding of divine things, and not to philosophical speculation, which they consider to be a primary source of apostate corruption of divine revelation.

However, Launius likes theology. And so he complains that the Saints confuse history with theology. “Confusing theology with history, therefore, requires that believing Saints accept a specified set of affirmations that are grounded in the ‘pure’ thoughts and actions of past individuals, especially those of Joseph Smith.”27

In order to trust God, to take hold of the forgiveness made available through the atonement of Jesus Christ, one certainly must affirm a number of facts about Jesus of Nazareth, including that he was resurrected and that he revealed himself to the ancient

26 Ibid., 208.
27 Ibid., 198.
Nephites and eventually to Joseph Smith. Of course, these are believed to be actual events in time and space and not merely some theological speculations. Hence, for the Latter-day Saint faith to be true, the Book of Mormon must be exactly what it claims. Launius identifies what he calls "one sophisticated exposition of this position," which he thinks has boiled the issue down to the answers that had to be given of two related questions: "Was Joseph Smith a genuine seer and prophet, and is the Book of Mormon true? If either one or the other is true, because both are linked, the truth of the other is thereby warranted."\(^28\)

Without providing an argument, Launius brushes aside what is clearly a legitimate either-or issue—and also one that is clearly within the realm in which historians attempt to operate, that is, in providing accounts of what they think happened in the past. But Launius objects to having "the perception of truth or falsity about the religion . . . rest[ing] on what historians say about those who have gone before."\(^29\)

One wonders what he means by describing the "strong Christology" found in the Book of Mormon. A teaching about Jesus of Nazareth being the Messiah or Christ simply makes no sense apart from a belief that Jesus was killed and then resurrected. To take away what are clearly historical claims from faith is to reduce religion to some advice about how to live that is shorn of any link with God.

Launius has cast around for a peg to hang his so-called "middle position" on, and he has found it in Brent Metcalfe's *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, specifically in Tony Hutchinson's essay.\(^30\) Launius quotes Hutchinson as having "bluntly summarized the central issue [contention?] tackled in

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29 Launius, "From Old to New Mormon History," 198.
this book: ‘Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints should confess in faith that the Book of Mormon is the word of God but also abandon claims that it is a historical record of the ancient peoples of the Americas.’” 31 Launius neglects to deal with the detailed criticisms of Hutchinson’s essay, 32 or with any similar and related literature. That naturalistic explanations of the Book of Mormon are seriously flawed is exactly what the responses to the essays contained in Metcalfe’s New Approaches have demonstrated. 33

Is it proper, I wonder, to simply brush aside this literature as unsatisfactory and inconclusive simply because it contains arguments and evidences that run counter to one’s own ideology? I think not. Launius also fails to notice Hutchinson’s admission that what one believes about Jesus Christ must ultimately be grounded on historical reality and hence also necessarily contain historical claims; otherwise one has simply substituted some currently fashionable moral sentiments for faith. Since I have already dealt with Hutchinson’s stance in considerable detail, I need not repeat my criticisms here, which clearly apply to the “more ‘catholic’ middle position” advocated by Launius.


32 See, for example, Midgley, “The Current Battle over the Book of Mormon,” 200–254.