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Playing with Half a Decker: The Countercult Religious Tradition Confronts the Book of Mormon

Louis Midgley

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Playing with Half a Decker: The Countercult Religious Tradition Confronts the Book of Mormon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Louis Midgley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Review of “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge in Chile” (1990), by Dean Maurice Helland.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Playing with Half a Decker: The Countercult
Religious Tradition Confronts the Book of Mormon

Reviewed by Louis Midgley

But I’ll go in hate to feed upon the prodigal Christian.

Shakespeare, Merchant of Venice

Experience proves this or that, or nothing, according to the preconceptions we bring to it.

C. S. Lewis, God in the Dock

By reviewing Dean Maurice Helland’s “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge in Chile”—his doctoral dissertation at Oral Roberts University in the School of Theology and Missions—I fear that I will lend to it an importance it does not deserve. Reverend Helland was for over fifteen years involved in anti-Mormon activities in Chile. In 1990, following the approval of his dissertation, he withdrew from his anti-Mormon “outreach”\(^1\) and took a position at Oral Roberts where he cur-

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1 In 1991 Helland was listed in a compendium of countercult agencies as responsible for Global Gospel Outreach, operating out of Santiago, Chile, and focused on anti-Mormon activities. See Eric Pement and Keith E. Tolbert, The 1991 Directory of Cult Research Organizations: A Worldwide Listing of 652 Agencies and Individuals (Trenton, MI: American Religious Center, 1991), 59 (agency #466). Out of 510 Protestant Evangelical countercult agencies, 154 are in the business of criticizing Mormon things, while ten attack the RLDS, with half a dozen of these going after both. The United States has spawned 425 of these countercult agencies—Canada comes in a distant second. In addition to these agencies there are some lonely individuals busy fighting what they see as the threat of Mormonism. One such is Jack Kettler, operating out of Denver, Colorado. In The 1991 Directory Mr. Kettler was listed as involved with the local chapter of the Ex-Mormons for Jesus, but he has severed his relationship with that “para-church,” as he calls it. He is now on his own. He circu-
Why Quarrel with Doctor Helland?

Since the approval of his dissertation, for which he was awarded a Doctor of Divinity degree by Oral Roberts, Reverend Helland seems to have withdrawn at least from the front lines of

lates an essay entitled “Some Unanswered Questions Regarding the Mormon World View,” a thirty-page, single-spaced item last revised on 24 April 1992. This includes a letter addressed “To The President of the Mormon Church [sic] and The Twelve Apostles,” dated 13 May 1988, which consists of over ninety questions that he insists they officially answer, or else. Kettler demands answers to questions such as; “What is prime reality; i.e., the really real?” And “Is your world view logically coherent?” Or “How do you know evil is not good?” For an ironic and instructive response to Mr. Kettler’s questions, though without identifying him by name, see Hugh Nibley, “The Terrible Questions,” in his Temple and Cosmos: Beyond the Ignorant Present, vol. 12 in The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, ed. by Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1992), 336–78. Of course, Pement and Tolbert either do not know of or have chosen not to include all the countercult agencies or individuals in their directory. For example, they do not list “Preach the Word Ministry”, founded by Matt Paulson and Chris Roseburrough, and operating out of Pomona, California. Paulson has written a number of tracts, including an item called “Official Pro-Christ Literature,” a curious twelve-page leaflet assembling an assortment of anti-Mormon arguments. In 1991, Paulson began distributing a seventy-page paper entitled “Can Mormonism Be Found in the First-Century?” It is easy to guess his answer. “Preach the Word Ministry” was not included in The 1991 Directory of Cult Research Organizations. According to Eric Pement, the agencies or individuals listed in his directory must, of course, be committed to the “gospel of Jesus Christ, in the historic sense of the term,” and also espouse “orthodox trinitarianism.” Mr. Paulson certainly fits those standards. In addition, Pement insists that those who assembled this directory tried not to include the “dishonest, unethical, grossly misinformed, or emotionally unstable” (vii). My impression is that a genuinely rigorous application of those standards would have materially reduced the length of Pement’s directory.

2 Helland began teaching at Oral Roberts in 1990 as an adjunct, but by the end of the year he was promoted to the rank of Instructor, and in the following year he became an Assistant Professor. Helland is also employed as Pastor of a Spanish congregation at Evangelistic Temple in Tulsa, Oklahoma. (Letter from Dean Helland to Louis Midgley, dated March 31, 1993.)
REVIEW OF BOOKS ON THE BOOK OF MORMON 5 (1993)

anti-Mormon "witnessing." Hence, it may seem unnecessary to pounce upon his dissertation. But "Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge" begs for a response, even at the risk of embarrassing its author and also by making Helland's "applied research project" appear more important than it actually is. On the other hand, his "project," though itself of no special intellectual merit, as I will demonstrate, is a tiny manifestation of a larger social phenomenon worthy of investigation and commentary by historians, political scientists, and sociologists; it is a manifestation of a virulent new countercult religious tradition.

Before encountering Reverend Helland’s doctoral dissertation, I thought that I had some sense of how bad student papers could be. I was wrong. And it is difficult to imagine a university, other than perhaps a diploma mill such as was used by the notorious “Dr.” Dee Jay Nelson, granting a doctoral degree for a less distinguished dissertation than "Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge." By granting him a degree, Professor Charles W. Snow did not distinguish himself or cover his School of Theology and Missions with glory. Oral Roberts, by accepting this dissertation, entered the business of producing and promoting anti-Mormon propaganda masquerading as serious scholarship.3

3 The business of packaging propaganda so that it appears as serious scholarship is flourishing. For example, we have recently seen the rise of the Religious Research Institute, which is not affiliated with a college or university or other legitimate scholarly enterprise, and which is also known as Gospel Truths Ministry, a name that more accurately signals its Evangelical Fundamentalist stance. This agency publishes Heart and Mind: The Newsletter of Gospel Truths Ministries, and it has also spent large sums of money publishing and distributing a book by Charles M. Larson (a former student at Brigham Young University and now a Provo, Utah, high school history teacher), which is being advertised as the definitive treatment of the book of Abraham; see Charles M. (Chuck) Larson... By His Own Hand upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 1992). For reviews of this book, see John Gee’s "A Tragedy of Errors" in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 4 (1992): 93–119; and also Michael D. Rhodes, "The Book of Abraham: Divinely Inspired Scripture," Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 4 (1992): 120–26. Larson lacks the specialized training, for example, in Egyptian, that would equip him to deal with the issues upon which he poses as an expert. He seems to have relied on anti-Mormons like the late Reverend Wesley P. Walters, Jerald and Sandra Tanner, and Michael Marquardt for much of what he included in his book. And unless one recognized that the “Forward” [sic—it most certainly should read ‘Foreword’] to
“Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge” reflects at least some of the inside workings of what are now being described as countercult religious movements (which are concerned with heretical beliefs in addition to deeds) as distinguished from anticult movements (which are concerned only with what they consider social evils of cults). Of course, something has to be labelled a “cult” before it can serve as an enemy—a heterodoxy—against which someone with an urge to start a jihad can define his own orthodoxy and mobilize others to battle against what they have a need to picture as somehow linked to the very legions of hell. This passionate crusade against the supposed heresies of people who genuinely consider themselves Christian is now also thought by at least one observer to constitute a “new

Larson’s book was written by the Reverend Walters, a lifelong enemy of the Church, one could read for many pages without discovering that this book is religious propaganda packaged in such a way as to disguise its contents and also the intentions of its author and publisher. For example, it is only at the very end of this book that the sectarian cat gets out of the bag when Larson teams up with anti-Mormon Floyd McElveen to preach the “orthodox religion” to Latter-day Saints by opining that “none of the denominations is the one true Church,” that everyone, if and only if they have accepted notions promoted by certain preachers, is part of the “body of Christ.” “Dear reader,” they claim, “by a simple prayer of faith you can make the decision today to receive God’s free offer of salvation.” And they actually propose this “simple prayer,” larding it with the sentiments and formulas made familiar through the auspices of the Electronic Church. Repeating this prayer will presumably enable one to own as a personal possession, once and for all, the cheap grace of totally unmerited forgiveness offered by Evangelical preachers of the orthodox religion.

4 This terminology and related distinction comes highly recommended by Massimo Introvigne, Director of CESNUR (the Center for Studies on New Religions) which is located in Turino, Italy. Dr. Introvigne has an academic interest in countercult religious movements that target Mormons. See his “The Devil Makers: Contemporary Evangelical Fundamentalist Anti-Mormonism and its 19th Century French Origins,” unpublished paper read at the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, May 1992, at St. George, Utah; and his “Almost Mormon, Almost Christian: The Image of the RLDS Church in Contemporary Anti-Mormonism,” unpublished paper read at the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, May 1993, at Lamoni, Iowa.
religious tradition." And countercult activities are significant, especially to Latter-day Saints, who are a prime target.

After only one year in residency at Oral Roberts during 1984 to 1985, Reverend Helland returned to Chile, where he had previously served for a decade as a Pentecostal missionary. Back in Chile, he resumed his anti-Mormon campaign as part of his “applied research project.” The “research” for this dissertation was done both prior to his entry into his doctoral program and while on “home leave” from his post in Chile, though not in a library, but merely through contacts with countercult agencies in the business of attacking Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

Those portions of the Protestant evangelical countercult movement most directly responsible for spawning Reverend Helland’s “project” are concerned with sniffing out and exposing not merely what they consider heresies, but with rooting out something they see as wholly demonic. Reverend Helland, though a nice person, seems to fit at least on the margins of the zealous faction of the countercult movement. Within that faction there is virtually no semblance of tolerance for different opinions on religious matters. Hence, the militant types within the countercult movement do not just take note of differences or what are considered the religious aberrations of those they oppose. Nor are these zealots inclined to engage in a decorous dialogue with their presumed enemies; they strive to root them out with whatever means at their disposal—fair or foul, rational or irrational, sane or insane. Fortunately, they have at least to this point not gone beyond legal restraints, though Reverend Helland admits that he may have been a party to some anti-Mormon activity that eventually led to others engaging in violence against Latter-day Saints and their properties in Chile.

Dr. Introvigne uses the expression “new religious tradition” to identify a portion of the burgeoning countercult movement. See Introvigne, “The Devil Makers,” 3. It is ironic that this label can now be employed to describe a segment of anti-Mormon activities. What does this say about what Jan Shipps chooses to label “a new religious tradition,” but which the faithful consider the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ? See Shipps, Mormonism: A Story of a New Religious Tradition (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985). Shipps may have borrowed her label from language in Fawn M. Brodie’s No Man Knows my History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1946; 2d ed., 1985), viii.
Elements of the countercult movement are increasingly inclined to blast away at any deviance from their narrow sectarian notions of what constitutes Christianity by casting others as demonic, diabolical and satanic. The lunatic fringe of this bizarre "new religious tradition" proclaims that virtually everyone who does not accept its idiosyncratic view of the world is satanic and demon-possessed. Attention to Reverend Helland's dissertation, as bad as it is, may assist Latter-day Saints in understanding a prevalent social phenomenon that otherwise may be inexplicable and bewildering, just as it is also genuinely offensive and even frightening in its ferocity. In reading the most extreme of the literature produced by this "new religious tradition," one begins to feel a deepened sympathy for Jews long confronted by outbursts of religious hatred. The existence of evangelical countercult activity (an essentially American religious movement) aimed at Latter-day Saints is important in the lives of numerous people—numbering perhaps in the millions—especially to those with roots in the evangelical movement in America, but also increasingly in other parts of the world as well.

Reverend Helland's dissertation, though not a contribution to the scholarly literature on the Book of Mormon, opens to our view several worlds in which the Book of Mormon plays a part. But by examining his dissertation, I do not wish to give splendor to obscurity, and distinction to undeserved merit. There are so many features of this unusually incompetent diatribe that are inviting targets that it is difficult to restrain the urge to take at least a few shots. So let the volleys ring out.

The Monstrous Project—Parroting the Trailblazers

Reverend Helland first addresses the question: "Do Mormons Need to Be Evangelized?" (pp. 6-31). In doing so he follows a trail already blazed by generations of anti-Mormon publicists. For example, Latter-day Saints worship "another

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6 Though Introigne traces some of its ingredients back to bizarre propaganda generated over a century ago in France; see his "The Devil Makers," especially 17-28.
7 Numbers in parentheses indicate pages in "Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge."
Jesus” (p. 7, cf. 28–30), they follow false prophets (p. 7), and hence they are “of antichrist” (p. 7), all on a portion of a single page of his dissertation. One might wonder how he reached the conclusion that Latter-day Saints are “of antichrist.” He charges that Latter-day Saints “deny the literal incarnation of Christ,” at least as presumably those he labels “Bible-believing Christians” tend to understand such things, and hence the Saints “are ‘of antichrist.’” The reason he jumps to this conclusion is that the Saints, in rejecting notions of the Trinity as formulated by the theologians, thereby deny that Jesus is God incarnate. And because Latter-day Saints are “of antichrist,” according to Reverend Helland, it follows that their leaders are “merely masquerading as true Christians” (p. 7). But Reverend Helland is just warming up: when closing in on his target, he charges that “Joseph Smith, Jr. admired Islam,” that “his parent’s home was a ‘perfect brothel,’” and that “the whole Smith family was ‘lurid,’” and on and on (p. 10). Such is the tone.

9 This is a standard anti-Mormon bromide. Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks have recently examined this and other similar opinions advanced by anti-Mormon publicists. See their Offenders for a Word: How Anti-Mormons Play Word Games to Attack the Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1992), 55–62.

10 Helland presumably has in mind members of various Pentecostal churches. He loves to beg the question by referring to “Bible-believing Christians” (see pp. 50, 71, 121, 127) and “Bible-believing churches” (see pp. 111, 121–24, 126–29, 132).

11 From Helland’s perspective, this is so even though the Saints both teach and believe what the New Testament teaches—that Jesus of Nazareth is and was the Son of God, and, as such, the Messiah or Anointed One or Christ and hence God in that sense.

12 Helland knows these things because he has an anti-Mormon book that contains such charges. It seems that virtually anything, no matter how absurd, obscene, or ridiculous—and clearly false—that can be found in a book will be trotted out, if it can be used to discredit Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Latter-day Saints have come to expect this kind of thing from a few marginal preachers. But it is not common for a university to sponsor and promote the same kind of propaganda. Helland cites R. C. Evans, Forty Years in the Mormon Church—Why I Left It (Independence, MO: Ex-RLDS for Jesus, no date). Evans was an RLDS official who defected and wrote a book blasting his former faith by collecting tales that simply cannot be taken seriously. See Roger D. Launius, “R. C. Evans: Boy Orator of the Reorganization,” John Whitmer Historical Association Journal 3 (1983): 40–50, for an excellent account of the resentment behind the Evans expose. Evans saw himself as a highly significant figure in the
and content of “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge.” It would, of course, be unproductive to recite more of this litany of charges.

Convinced that Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon are not merely to be explained as instances of human frailty, but that they are satanic, Reverend Helland had for many years yearned to meet the challenge posed by the Book of Mormon to what he considers orthodox religion. He notes that Latter-day Saint missionaries are visible and attractive as they go door-to-door (p. 3) spreading, of course, satanic poison. Hence, something must be done to counter the Mormon threat. He determined to meet this Mormon challenge by writing an essay “for a directed studies course at Oral Roberts University in 1987” (pp. 116, 130) which he titled “Book of Mormon Problems.” This essay was written while Reverend Helland was busy confronting the danger posed by Mormonism in Chile and was published in 1988 in J. Edward (Ed) Decker's anti-Mormon newsletter.13

“Book of Mormon Problems” is a prosaic assault on the Book of Mormon culled from an assortment of anti-Mormon tracts. Though written as part of his doctoral studies at Oral Roberts, it is neither original nor significant. With some modifications in the first few paragraphs, and by adding chapters and sections in place of the original subject headings, and then translated by its author into Spanish and published as Problemas con el Libro de Mormon,14 it is what Reverend Helland likes to call a book (p. 229). “Book of Mormon Problems” became the instrument employed and presumably tested as Helland’s “applied research project” for his degree at Oral Roberts.15

Reorganization, but his role apparently was such that he was not mentioned by Richard P. Howard in The Church through the Years, vol. 2, The Reorganization Comes of Age, 1860–1992 (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1993).


14 Dean Helland, Problemas con el Libro de Mormon (Santiago, Chile: Difusion Cristiana, 1989). A thousand copies of this 69-page-pamphlet were published.

15 An English version of Helland’s “Book of Mormon Problems” is included in “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge” as Appendix A (pp. 141–84). In this version of his paper no corrections were made of obvi-
Unfortunately, Problemas con el Libro de Mormon does nothing to overcome the “ignorance about Mormonism” that Reverend Helland thinks “abounds” (p. 3); it only compounds the ignorance, whatever its effectiveness as anti-Mormon propaganda.

Reverend Helland’s “applied research project” involved training 113 Chilean “Bible-believing Christians” by having them purchase the Spanish translation of his “Book of Mormon Problems” (along with a two-hour seminar he conducted) to equip them to proselytize Latter-day Saints. With Reverend Helland’s pamphlet attacking the Book of Mormon in hand (though without having read the Book of Mormon), these “Bible-believing Christians” were ready to “witness” to Latter-day Saints. The idea behind Reverend Helland’s “project” is the belief that the most effective way of countering the Mormon threat is by informing Chilean Pentecostals about the Book of Mormon.

Out of the 113 people trained by Reverend Helland to “witness” to Latter-day Saints, 88 reported that they studied his pamphlet. Of those, 43 claimed to have talked to one or more Latter-day Saints about its contents, and of those no more than 24 seem to have been in some way influenced by it.16 Though

ous blemishes that appeared when it was published in 1982. For example, n. 81 reads “Wesley, 4” in both versions, but it clearly should read “Walters, 4” because it is obviously a reference to Wesley P. Walters, The Human Origins of the Book of Mormon; cf. nn. 35, 41, 77, 89, 93, 103, 105 (pp. 179–82; 214), where the citation is correctly identified. Though Helland did not include a Spanish translation of his pamphlet in his dissertation, he has provided me with a copy of Problemas con el Libro de Mormon. And in n. 81 it also reads “Wesley, 4.”

16 Helland obviously had an interest in showing a high degree of effectiveness for his plan to teach Chilean “Bible-believing Christians” to attack the Book of Mormon. He therefore vigorously sought responses from those he trained to witness to Latter-day Saints. Some 90 out of 113 responded to his entreaties concerning the effectiveness of his “project.” He claims that 81 Latter-day Saints, including 28 missionaries, were contacted by those he trained. Helland’s respondents claimed that 24 “Mormons did leave Mormonism,” 14 of whom started attending “Bible-believing churches” (p. 126). In five instances Helland’s respondents claim to have had direct confirmation of Latter-day Saints actually turning up in “Bible-believing churches” as a result of his proselytizing project. Only six of the fourteen who presumably ceased being Latter-day Saints are reported to have read Helland’s book. At one point he claims that “the fourteen others who left Mormonism became active with the Jehovah’s Witnesses” (p. 128).
Helland claims effectiveness for his mode of "witnessing," it is not clear what that means, for he made no provision for testing it against any other possible approach to Latter-day Saints. There is, therefore, no reason to examine his supposed "scientific" verification of his thesis in this review.  

Resonating with the Authorities

These is no original contribution to the understanding of the Book of Mormon in Reverend Helland's thesis—everything he presents is borrowed from others. What are the sources for Reverend Helland's attack on the Book of Mormon? His "Review of Related Literature" (pp. 32–71) both identifies his authorities and explains something of what he derived from them. He reveals what he knows about Mormon things by reviewing all the literature he felt was relevant to his project. Obviously I cannot examine all of this inadvertent confession of scholarly incompetence, but only a small sample of the treasures to be found therein.

Reverend Helland's revealing first words concerning the literature on the Book of Mormon are as follows: "although no research projects as such have been done in this area, abundant literature existed dealing with the truth or falsity of the Book of Mormon" (p. 32). And what might constitute this "abundant literature"? Reverend Helland lists and annotates the literature "sympathetic to the Book of Mormon," "sources opposed to the Book of Mormon," and "neutral sources." The "sources" he considers "sympathetic to the Book of Mormon" include the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon (pp. 33–34), as well as later Latter-day Saint and RLDS editions (p. 34). Helland also mentions the Latter-day Saint and RLDS versions of the Doctrine and Covenants (p. 37), the Pearl of Great Price (p. 40), James E. Talmage's *The Articles of Faith* (p. 32), David Whitmer's *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (p. 33), B. C. Flint's *An Outline of the History of the Church of Christ (Temple Lot)* (p. 33), Elder Bruce R. McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine* (p. 40), and thirteen other similar sources. The only Latter-day Saint sources that Helland places in this category that deal with the question of the truth of the Book of Mormon are the 1988 CES *Book of Mormon Student Manual* (p. 34) and

17 There is virtually nothing in Helland's chapter on "Methodology and Procedures" (pp. 113–33) that bears much resemblance to current notions of how to do research in the social sciences.
Daniel H. Ludlow’s *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (p. 36), though neither is a prime example of Book of Mormon scholarship or of efforts to deal with the question of the historical authenticity of that text. Reverend Helland simply is not acquainted with the scholarly literature on the Book of Mormon.

But Reverend Helland is aware of anti-Mormon criticisms of the Book of Mormon. He lists and annotates forty-four “sources opposing the Book of Mormon” (pp. 43-62). These are described as sources that he “resonated with” or which he “resonated well with” (pp. 43-44), or sources whose “value ... was incalculable” (p. 61), that were “important” (pp. 51, 57), “very important” (pp. 47, 55), and “vitaly important” (pp. 49, 52, 53). One source was described as “indispensable” (p. 50), another as “one of the most important sources” (p. 56), another as a “primary source reference” (p. 58), another provided the “primary undergirding” for the project (p. 62), and a book by the Tanners was described as “a key” (p. 48). These sources, for which Helland could hardly find adjectives sufficiently effusive, include books or essays by Loftes Tryk (p. 43), Michael Marquardt (pp. 44, 52), Ed Decker and Dave Hunt (p. 44), Jerald and Sandra Tanner (pp. 47, 48, 54, 56, 58, 61), Fawn M. Brodie (p. 49), Ed Decker (p. 51), James R. Spencer (p. 51), Reverend John L. Smith (p. 52), Reverend Wesley P. Walters (p. 57), and, of course, E. D. Howe (pp. 58-59), the veritable grandfather of anti-Mormon distortion. Also included are various other anti-Mormon tracts, pamphlets, and books by people who are not exactly household names among Latter-day Saints, like Robert McKay (p. 45) of Utah Missions, Inc., a “ministry” attacking Mormons that was started by the Reverend John L. Smith, with whose work Reverend Helland is especially familiar (pp. 51, 53, cf. 3, 31, 74, 113–14).18 He also lists es-

18 Peterson and Ricks, in their *Offenders for a Word*, 55–62, cite Reverend John L. Smith as an example of confusion by anti-Mormons anxious to argue that Latter-day Saints worship “another Jesus.” Helland picked up this same charge (p. 3). Reverend Smith, who has the distinction of having founded Utah Missions, Inc., responded to *Offenders for a Word* in the November 1992 issue of the *Evangel*, a UMI newsletter. Reverend Smith triumphantly proclaimed: “I Have Arrived,” because he found his name mentioned in *Offenders for a Word*. After attacking Latter-day Saints for forty years, he expressed his gratification on finding that some Latter-day Saints had finally taken notice of him. Reverend Smith is getting on in years and now seems to ramble. Take, for example, the following: Peterson and Ricks
says by Hal Hougey (p. 43), Harry Ropp (p. 48), Vernal Holley (p. 55), James M. Tolle (p. 57), and Wally Tope (pp. 59–60), to name just a few virtually unknown anti-Mormon luminaries.

“denying that Mormonism is Christian” (Offenders for a Word, 2, which is quoted by Reverend Smith, cf. also 20, etc.). Reverend Smith knows where he stands on Mormon things; he does not soften his stance, nor does he deny that he has identified the “Satanic nature of the Christ-denying cult of Mormonism” (quoted from The Utah Evangel 33 [May 1986]: 3), or speculated that Anti-Christ may turn out to be a Mormon. He proclaims that Mormonism is “anti-Christian” (see The Evangel 37 [Oct. 1990]: 12). However, Robert McKay, Smith’s assistant at UMI, garbles the issue by denying that Peterson and Ricks have correctly stated the position of UMI. McKay distances himself and UMI from the “stinging comments about the church made by anti-Mormons.” McKay concedes that “those thus quoted [by Peterson and Ricks] were totally out of line in their language if not their message.” McKay’s strategy, unlike that of Reverend Smith, is to make the practice of vilification, misrepresentation, slander, vituperation, mockery, innuendo, bald lies, and ridicule less obvious. He seems determined to salvage whatever he can of the anti-Mormon “message” by stating the thesis of Offenders for a Word incorrectly. He claims that what he calls “the premise of this book is that anti-Mormons merely twist words in order to make it appear that ‘Mormons are not Christian,’ when in fact members of the LDS church are Christians.” Reverend Smith, on the other hand, gets the key point right: anti-Mormons, he acknowledges, are in the business of flatly “denying that Mormonism is Christian.” McKay equivocates—he asserts that Peterson and Ricks argue that anti-Mormons claim that Latter-day Saints are not Christian, but UMI has never made such a charge, though in the same issue of The Evangel Reverend Smith makes that charge. McKay claims that UMI has always held that some Latter-day Saints are in fact genuine Christians; it is Mormonism that is not Christian. McKay’s mistake allows him to avoid confronting the argument set out by Peterson and Ricks. When Reverend Smith stated the position of UMI, it turned out to be the claim refuted by Peterson and Ricks, that is, that UMI denies “that Mormonism—as a doctrinal system and institution—is a Christian church.” Such is the quality of Utah Missions, Inc., one of Reverend Helland’s chief sources of information on Mormon things.


20 Helland includes a reference to the same unsigned item entitled “Lee Condemns Church Leaders” from the Ogden Standard-Examiner (reporting the excommunication of George P. Lee) in both his list of sources sympathetic and opposed to the Book of Mormon (pp. 40, 46).
Finally, Reverend Helland lists and annotates 18 “neutral sources” (p. 63). But it is unclear what he means by “neutral,” since he includes in that category a criticism of Joseph Smith written by the late Reverend Wesley P. Walters (p. 65), about which I will have more to say later. Helland also included something written by Walters among the “sources opposing the Book of Mormon.”

Borrowing from such impressive sources—if we are to trust the florid language used to describe them—Reverend Helland advances arguments against both the historical authenticity and truth of the Book of Mormon that rest on the authority of individuals virtually all of whom are manifestly incompetent. Unfortunately or fortunately, depending on one’s point of view, he manages to demonstrate that he is not well informed on the Book of Mormon or on Mormonism, though he is modestly but not even especially well informed on the contents of a selection of anti-Mormon tracts. Hence, one can turn almost anywhere in “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge” and see signs of confusion about Mormon things. For example, for him the Book of Mormon “identifies the American Indians as part of the lost tribes of Israel” (p. 4, cf. also 57, 66). Of course, what is obvious to Reverend Helland, turns out to be false. The Book of Mormon is, at least from his perspective, an account of a “white race” who were “destroyed by a dark race” (p. 1, cf. 77, 147, 174).21 Reverend Helland also assumes that the Book of Mormon teaches and Latter-day Saints believe that it contains the

21 Helland has an amusing discussion of “The Origin of Races,” which he aims at the Book of Mormon. “The Bible does not address the topic of the origins of races” (p. 95), but it teaches that all races are equal before God. And the Bible, instead of talking about races, “divides humanity into two great categories: Jews and Gentiles” (p. 95). He thereby conflates the Bible as a whole with some language found in the New Testament. These assertions set the stage for criticism of what he considers “the Book of Mormon concept of dark skin being a curse for rebellion against God” and so forth. Such an idea has “no place in biblical theology. It is an open display of the racism of pre-Civil War America” (p. 95). Helland sets forth two alternative explanations of race. One theory he borrows from an Evangelical source which he bolsters by labelling it “scientific.” The races, he opines, were all there in the genetic constitution of the “sons of Noah and their wives.” That theory he contrasts with what he assumes is “the Book of Mormon’s theory of races based on God’s curse on the darker races” (p. 67). All of this is curious. What the Book of Mormon actually describes are religious and cultural differences that result from keeping or failing to keep covenants. Nothing is said about the origin of races.
entire history of the pre-Columbian people of America—all of them (e.g., 174)—up to the coming of Europeans. Hence, he assumes that any credible statement by anyone about the pre-Columbian peoples of America that does not mention a Lehi colony is a final, scientific proof that the Book of Mormon is false (pp. 67, 69, 70, 87). And if one wants still another example of someone who is fond of the argument that Joseph Smith at least partly crafted the Book of Mormon out of a fictional account of early America produced by Solomon Spaulding, then Helland is your author (see pp. 13, 48, 55–56, 59, 62, 151–55).

22 Helland quotes from something written by Michael D. Coe, once a Professor of Archeology at Yale University with an interest in the archeology of Mesoamerica. Helland identifies him as “Mormon archaeologist Michael Coe” (p. 25), but he was never Latter-day Saint or Mormon in any sense. Helland quotes from Coe’s essay entitled “Mormons and Archeology: An Outside View,” Dialogue 8/2 (1973): 40–48. What Helland quoted appeared in a book by someone named Hougey. And Helland did not know who Coe was or where the passages came from. Knowing that Coe was not Latter-day Saint makes a difference in how one understands what he wrote.

23 In addition to the late “Dr.” Walter Martin’s enthrallement with the Spaulding thesis; see his The Maze of Mormonism (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962), 57–62.

24 Helland describes the thesis standing behind his project as his belief that “Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon using the King James Bible, Spaulding’s Manuscript Found and Ethan Smith’s View of the Hebrews” (p. 48). Vernal Holley’s study attempted “to show that Solomon Spaulding, a seminary-educated man, was the intellectual author of the Book of Mormon” (p. 55). Helland “assumed the same position” (p. 55). Holley’s essay is described “as the kind of confirmation one would expect to find if this theory were valid” (p. 55). But the “Spaulding-Rigdon theory” of the Book of Mormon has actually fallen on hard times, and now has no serious scholarly support. For example, in 1972 Marvin S. Hill argued that “in 1945 the Spaulding theory of the origins of the Book of Mormon was still strongly in vogue, most scholarly works accepting it as the explanation of the Book of Mormon. Following [Fawn M. Brodie’s] trenchant attack on the theory its popularity quickly declined. Today nobody gives it credence.” See Hill, “Brodie Resisted: A Reappraisal,” Dialogue 7/4 (Winter 1972): 73. A few anti-Mormons have tried to revive it, but to no avail. Jerald and Sandra Tanner have rejected it, even in its refurbished formulations. See their pamphlet entitled Did Spaulding Write the Book of Mormon? (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1977). Helland brushes aside the rejection of the Spaulding-Rigdon theory by the Tanners, and he also ignores the criticisms leveled at it by Fawn M. Brodie in her No Man Knows My
The difficulties in Reverend Helland’s “research” are obvious. But he has an excuse; his primary “research” for his “project” on the Book of Mormon was done while on “home leaves” from his anti-Mormon activities in Chile, but not in a library. Instead, he visited Utah Missions, Inc. (UMI), and met Reverend John L. Smith in December of 1979.25 Helland also discovered Ed Decker’s “ministry” when he heard him attacking the Restored Gospel on his car radio while he was on leave from his post in Chile.26 Later Reverend Helland wrote to Decker from Chile27 and they became friends and eventually even associates. This took place before Reverend Helland had started work on his Doctor of Divinity degree at Oral Roberts. And this link to Decker explains the publication of Reverend Helland’s attack on the Book of Mormon in Decker’s anti-Mormon

History, even though he was initially moved to reject the Book of Mormon as a result of reading her book. In order to have an explanation for the Book of Mormon, Helland ignores the criticisms of the Spaulding-Rigdon theory, and even returns to the account provided by E. D. Howe in 1834. Helland attempts to breathe life back into the Spaulding theory by turning to something by Vernal Holley, which he claims confirms that Joseph Smith used “the existing Spaulding manuscript” in composing the Book of Mormon (p. 13), whatever that means. For a careful criticism of Holley’s speculation, see Ara Norwood, Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1 (1989): 80-88. Helland also makes use of a book by Wayne L. Cowdrey, Howard A. Davis, and Donald R. Scales (pp. 151-55) entitled Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon? (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House, 1977). However, the claim that something written by Spaulding actually turns up in the Book of Mormon turned out to be another one of those faith-destroying rumors fabricated and then circulated by anti-Mormons. Helland admits to being aware of this inconvenience (p. 151), but goes on as if it made no difference to his stance. For a review of the entire fiasco, see Lester E. Bush, Jr., “The Spaulding Theory: Then and Now,” Dialogue 10/4 (Autumn 1977): 40-69, with specific comments on the Cowdrey-Davis-Scales nonsense at 57-63.

25 Letter from Helland to Midgley, dated 29 March 1993, and also in a lengthy phone conversation held on May 19, 1993. It was Reverend Smith, with his Utah Missions, Inc., who introduced Helland to the anti-Mormon materials distributed by Jerald and Sandra Tanner through their Utah Lighthouse Ministry operating out of Salt Lake City, Utah.


newslette r.28 Hel l a n d did not anticipate that Decker and the Tanners were about to become bitter enemies brawling over control of the anti-Mormon enterprise.29 It is, incidentally, not clear exactly where John L. Smith and Utah Missions, Inc., stand on the ugly quarrel between the Tanners (and their allies) and Decker (and his).

Reverend Helland’s “research” thus included an interview with Reverend John L. Smith in April 1988, and also an earlier visit to the Marlow, Oklahoma, headquarters of Utah Missions, Inc., an anti-Mormon business operated for many years by Reverend Smith,30 a Baptist preacher, whose “ministry” is now

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28 Ed Decker is currently responsible for a “ministry” called Saints Alive in Jesus, which is headquartered in Issaquah, Washington, and which publishes Saints Alive in Jesus Newsletter. Saints Alive operations turn up from time to time in various places around the United States. The 1991 Directory of Cult Research Organizations list 8 branches of Saints Alive as closed, inactive or defunct, while 11 remain active, including one in Australia. Decker is probably best known by Latter-day Saints for his links to the lurid, grossly inaccurate film entitled “The God Makers” and now the even more atrocious “The God Makers II.”

29 For an accessible account of this bizarre and amusing Batrachomyomachia (battle of the Frogs and Mice) between the Decker faction of “New Age” anti-Mormons and the Tanners (and their various allies), see Daniel C. Peterson’s delightful “A Modern Malleus maleficarum,” Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 3 (1991): 231–60.

30 In 1991, Reverend Smith “has been a student of Mormonism since 1951,” and “has lectured 6,000 times on Mormonism in 43 states, including 100 colleges and universities”; The 1991 Directory of Cult Research Organizations, 40 (item #312). That would come to 150 lectures a year or 2.42 a week for forty years. UMI has a well-deserved reputation for using shopworn arguments against Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, though they are hardly in the same league with the more spectacular faction of anti-Mormons led by Ed Decker. UMI has been known to publish criticisms of the Book of Mormon that are clearly false. For example, they have repeatedly claimed that the appearance of the name Alma in the Book of Mormon is proof that the book is fraudulent because it is a Latin feminine name. But it is also a Hebrew masculine name, and they know it. Even after their mistake had been pointed out to them, they repeated their charges in their newsletters. In addition, after apparently acknowledging privately that they had repeated their false charge against the Book of Mormon, they have refused to retract or correct those false statements in their newsletters. Incidentally, UMI is not an opulent operation, as countercult agencies go. Mike Reynolds, who now directs its operations, informed me that the operating budget for UMI is under $200,000 a year. This should be compared to the costs incurred by Luke Wilson’s Religious Research Institute (aka
owned and operated by the Southern Baptist Convention.\textsuperscript{31} As part of his anti-Mormon campaign, Reverend Smith assembled a library of materials relating to Mormon things, which those who have taken over his operation continue to maintain and mine.\textsuperscript{32} Helland seems to have had access to that library. He was able to cull this source for his “project” during his December 1979 visit to the UMI office in Marlow, Oklahoma. He also interviewed Reverend Smith (p. 53). Helland does not appear to have made use of university or other libraries in assembling his “project,” though he “bought books from Mormon bookstores while on furlough in 1984.”\textsuperscript{33}

It appears that Reverend Helland’s real dissertation supervision was not provided by Charles W. Snow, who signed as “supervisor,” or Dr. James Tollett,\textsuperscript{34} who signed as “reader,” but was provided by sectarian luminaries like Reverend John L. Smith and Ed Decker, neither of whom have academic credentials or experience, though both have honed their skills in anti-Mormon propaganda. Hence, the best that can be said for “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge” is that the “project” described therein was made to rest upon little more than a hap-

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\textsuperscript{31} Reverend John L. Smith’s Utah Missions, Inc., was given to the Southern Baptist Convention when he retired, and it is now operated by the SBC as part of its Home Mission Board. (Letter from Michael H. Reynolds, Director/Editor, Utah Missions, Inc., to Louis Midgley, dated 15 January 1993.)

\textsuperscript{32} UMI publishes a sordid tabloid-style newsletter entitled The Evangel, for general circulation, and also The Inner Circle for contributors.

\textsuperscript{33} Letter from Helland to Midgley, dated 29 March 1993.

\textsuperscript{34} According to Helland, “Dr. James Tollett (D.Min.) is our main cults man here at ORU. He is pretty sharp on Mormonism, but usually refers people to me on that subject.” Letter from Helland to Midgley, dated 29 March 1993.
hazard culling of complaints against the Book of Mormon, the Latter-day Saints, and their leaders, as well as against Joseph Smith. There is virtually nothing in “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge” that could not be found in the literary arsenals of agencies forming a portion of the countercult religious tradition.

**On the Helland Background**

Who exactly is Dean Maurice Helland and why is he disposed to focus his energies on attacking the Restored Gospel? Before I take up a few of the more intriguing features found in his dissertation, I will tell his story. He has assisted me in doing this by responding to various questions in a long phone conversation and in a letter where he answered questions I still had about his background. One reason for looking into his background is that there are more than a few hints in “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge” that its author really knows about Mormon things because he was at one time a Mormon of sorts, that is, involved with the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. In his dissertation, he claims that “the researcher was born in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and his background familiarized him with the key elements undergirding Mormonism” (p. 3, emphasis supplied). He began “Book of Mormon Problems” with a similar claim: “The author of this training manual was born into a family which belonged to the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints with headquarters in Independence, Missouri” (p. 146, emphasis supplied). As I will show, such claims stretch matters just a little. In addition, there is reproduced in “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge” a statement by Ed Decker claiming that “Dean Helland is a former member of the RLDS Church” (p. 214, emphasis supplied). Decker’s statement is simply not true.35 Instead, Reverend Helland was born in 1943 in Independence, Missouri, into a family deeply involved in the Pentecostal movement. And, as I will show, this is an important clue to understanding how and why he got into anti-Mormon polemics as a Pentecostal missionary in Chile.

Reverend Helland’s parents had, at least for a time, affiliated with the RLDS; they did so because they longed for a com-

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35 According to Helland, he “was not baptized in the RLDS Church, since we left it when I was five years old.” (Letter from Helland to Midgley, dated March 29, 1993.)
munity in which they could experience the gifts of the Spirit as they found those described in the Book of Mormon. But by 1948, when he was just five, the Hellands severed their relationship with the Reorganization by joining a dissident group led by Pauline Hancock, the assertive daughter of a prominent RLDS family, and founder in 1946 of what was officially known as the Church of Christ (p. 229), but more commonly called the Basement Church after the building it employed for worship purposes. Upon joining the Hancock group, the Hellands jetisoned virtually everything distinctively RLDS, assuming that they had appropriated much of it in the first place. However, they did not abandon the Book of Mormon. Instead, they joined the Basement Church primarily because they felt that the RLDS were indifferent to the contents of the Book of Mormon.

According to Wayne Ham, currently director of the RLDS Temple project in Independence, Missouri, the Hancock faction consisted of a few former RLDS who met for years in a partially completed building on the corner of South Crysler and Linden in Independence, Missouri. In 1973, also according to Ham, those people then affiliated with the Basement Church rejected the Book of Mormon and thereby severed their remaining vesti-

36 Explanation by Helland, telephone conversation with me on March 19, 1993.
38 Olive Wilcox, who with her husband Eugene played an important role in the Hancock group, told me in 1983 at the Mormon History Association meetings in Omaha, Nebraska, that she understood that her name had not been removed from the RLDS membership rolls. It is possible that the RLDS did not remove from their rolls the names of those who affiliated with the Pauline Hancock group.
39 Wayne Ham estimated that the “Basement Church” in 1986 consisted of “about thirty-five persons.” Also, according to Ham, the Pauline Hancock group had the distinction of baptizing anti-Mormon luminaries Jerald and Sandra Tanner. This took place prior to their eventual submersion into a form of Protestant evangelical religiosity and their full entry into the business of anti-Mormon polemics. See Ham’s useful “Center-Place Saints,” in Maurice L. Draper and Debra Combs, eds., Restoration Studies III: A Collection of Essays about the History, Beliefs, and Practices of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House for the Temple School, 1986), 130. Helland places the Basement Church at Christler & Lyden [sic; Crysler and Linden].” Letter from Helland to Midgley, dated 29 March 1993.
gial links with the teachings of Joseph Smith.40 The Hellands came out of the Basement Church when Dean Helland was nine years old.41 Reverend Helland describes his memories of those years in the following way: "Those were important formative years of my life, and I knew I would grow up to be a minister at that time."42 But before that fateful decision by those with whom the Hellands had once affiliated in the Basement Church,

40 See Ham’s “Center-Place Saints,” 130. Olive Wilcox, at the Mormon History Association meetings in Omaha in May 1983, commanded me in her charming and morally earnest way not to let people like William D. (Bill) Russell take the Book of Mormon away from Latter-day Saints. This took place during the Presidential address by Bill Russell, who had just said the following: "When at age twenty-eight, when I first joined the [RLDS] Graceland faculty, teaching religion, I felt guilty for not having read the Book of Mormon. I was," Russell continued, "surprised to find that my two colleagues in the Religion Department—long since departed—had not read the Book of Mormon either. But there was a course in the catalog entitled 'Latter Day Saint Scriptures.' No one wanted to teach it. In my third year [at age thirty-one] I volunteered"; see William D. Russell, "History and Mormon Scriptures," Journal of Mormon History 10 (1983): 59. Olive Wilcox said: "can you imagine someone like him teaching your children religion?" And she followed with the injunction mentioned earlier. I replied by saying that, unlike the RLDS, who seem generally quite indifferent if not exactly hostile to the Book of Mormon, the Latter-day Saints take it seriously, and that she could still have the Book of Mormon in the Latter-day Saint community, if she so desired. She said that for her that possibility, unfortunately, had passed and that she would have to wait to a time after death to get her relationship with it sorted out. I later found that she, like the others involved in the Basement Church, had jettisoned the Book of Mormon and even had the habit of making a fuss out of their stance in the local newspapers from time to time. But there were moments when she could express a certain melancholy over her rejection of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

41 "My father had difficulty accepting Pauline [Hancock] as his teacher. He retained much from his Jesus Only Pentecostal background, and insisted on the importance of speaking in tongues. She rejected this. I believe this was the primary reason we left. Also, he had a problem being under a women pastor." When the Hellands left the Basement Church, at least his mother and others in his family "started going to Evangelistic Center (Pastor Rowden's church, presently on Truman Road), and soon we were speaking in tongues, prophesying, and seeing healings take place. We believed that God was preparing to send us to minister the Book of Mormon in power to the Lamanites"; letter from Helland to Midgley, 29 March 1993.

and when young Dean Helland was a mere twelve years of age, his parents moved to Arizona for the purpose of "doing missionary work among the Indians" (p. 129). Their purpose was to preach the Book of Mormon, but from within the horizon of understanding provided by their earlier grounding in the Pentecostal movement. Helland's father had earlier been a member of the Jesus Only Pentecostal Church. Long before moving to Arizona, and after they had broken with the Hancock faction, the Hellands returned to the Pentecostal movement, though they still clung to the Book of Mormon. Dean Helland was thus raised as a Pentecostal, but with the Book of Mormon tacked on for good measure. 43

After finishing a degree in Spanish at Arizona State University in 1966, Dean Helland took a job with a drug rehabilitation program in San Francisco called Teen Challenge, which was run by a Pentecostal group. He went there hoping to experience charismatic gifts by working with people who were in the gutter, so to speak. And during his seven months in San Francisco, like the Tanners, and seven years before the followers of Pauline Hancock in Missouri, he also rejected the Book of Mormon. 44 In "Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge,"

43 Helland describes the move to Arizona in the following language: "We sold everything in July of 1956 and set out for Arizona with only our clothes and a few belongings. This was by revelation, by tongues and interpretation and visions. We ended up in Phoenix, Arizona, on North Central, with a big billboard on the front of our house proclaiming, 'Indians, Come and Hear! We preach the Bible and the Book of Mormon!' We would go to the Indian reservation south of Phoenix often. We would visit Pentecostal churches and during testimony time, he [Dean Helland's father] would tell them that they needed the Book of Mormon to help straighten their doctrine out." Helland describes himself as "an enthusiastic witness of all these things. I thought," he writes, "my dad was like the Apostle Paul!" (letter from Helland to Midgley, dated 29 March 1993).

44 This took place in 1965 when Dean Helland was 22. His explanation of why he rejected the Book of Mormon is that reading Fawn Brodie's No Man Knows My History "planted in his mind" the "thought that Joseph Smith could actually make people see visions." Thereafter he doubted "the authenticity of David Whitmer's testimony of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon" (p. 50). Though Helland was influenced by Brodie's book, he flatly rejected her arguments concerning what she called "the Spaulding-Rigdon theory" of the Book of Mormon. See Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 143-45, 420-28. Though Helland indicates his dependence upon the so-called "Spaulding-Rigdon theory," he does so without responding to the arguments that make that theory one of the least at-
Helland reports that during his interval in San Francisco he desired to write a book proving the Book of Mormon (p. 146).\textsuperscript{45} He explains it this way: as part of his employment with the Pentecostal drug rehabilitation agency, he was busy teaching and discussing the Bible during the week from a Pentecostal perspective. On Saturdays he consulted the Book of Mormon for the purpose of proving it true. What he meant by proving it true was showing that it is in every detail consistent with Pentecostal presuppositions about the Bible. Of course, as one would expect, from within those parameters, doubts soon arose, but not about his understanding of the Bible, for his Pentecostal involvements and associates worked together to reinforce an essentially evangelical fundamentalist reading of the scriptures. Hence, it did not surprise me at all when Reverend Helland explained to me that the Book of Mormon simply had to agree in every detail with a Pentecostal reading of the Bible—it could not add anything to his Pentecostal understanding of what is taught in the Bible—or it was not only false but demonic. According to Helland, “upon researching the subject, he was soon overwhelmed by the great amount of evidence that the Book of Mormon is full of plagiarisms and many other problems which in fact demonstrate the very opposite” (p. 146) of its consistency with the Bible as understood from a Pentecostal perspective. And then, as he describes it, suddenly it occurred to him that he and other sincere believers in the Book of Mormon had been tricked by the Devil—Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, he decided, were demonic. He described to me how that thought was immediately followed by a sense of the departure of darkness.\textsuperscript{46}

In January 1967, Helland moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, married, and joined the Pentecostal Holiness Church and entered Oral Roberts University to work on a Divinity degree, which he

\textsuperscript{45} “When I was about twenty years old, I decided to write a book defending the Book of Mormon before the Christian world. It was while I was doing research to write it that I became convinced that it was wrong” (letter from Helland to Midgley, dated 29 March 1993).

\textsuperscript{46} Telephone conversation with Helland on 19 March 1993.
finished when he was twenty-six. In 1970 he became a Pentecostal preacher. He differed from his parents by flatly rejecting the Book of Mormon and hence also Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims, while they continued to cling to the Book of Mormon, even as thoroughgoing Pentecostals. And, in 1975, Reverend Helland moved to Chile for the World Missionary Assistance Plan of Burbank. His employment in Chile put him in direct competition with Latter-day Saint missionary activity—which he calls, using trendy terminology, a “missionary outreach” (p. 94). On his first furlough or home leave in the United States, he found the ammunition he needed to counter Latter-day Saint missionary efforts in the literature assembled by anti-Mormon publicists Reverend John L. Smith and Ed Decker. And it was from this literature that he eventually fashioned his doctoral dissertation.

Reverend Helland first encountered J. Edward (Ed) Decker while listening to the radio on his first furlough from Chile in 1979. In 1981, he wrote to Decker, and then eventually facilitated Decker’s visit to Chile in 1982. Helland was Decker’s host, driver and interpreter in Chile. Helland now feels that Decker is often irresponsible in the charges he makes against Latter-day Saints, since many of his claims cannot be supported even from anti-Mormon sources.

Ironically, Reverend Helland seems to have a mild case of the kind of proclivity he sees in Decker’s notorious anti-Mormon tirades, self-serving stories, and embellishments. For example, in “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge,” Reverend Helland boasts that Decker’s visit to Chile “severely curtailed” Latter-day Saint growth in that land, though in this instance, as in others, he neglects to cite evidence to support his claim. Reverend Helland’s “project” is larded with such bald assertions. Though others might focus on other unsupported and seemingly ludicrous pronouncements, my favorite is the following: Latter-day Saints, Helland proclaims, “believe that the Latin American

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47 This degree was awarded at the time when Oral Roberts was shifting from calling its earlier bachelor’s degree a master’s degree. Helland, who had been working on a bachelor’s degree, was awarded a master’s degree without having to fulfill a thesis requirement.

48 Helland also witnessed visits by Decker with his son, who was then a Latter-day Saint missionary in Chile. He reported to me that Decker kept his anti-Mormon zeal under wraps in his visits with his son, though he thundered against the Church on other occasions.

49 Telephone conversation with Helland on 19 March 1993.
countries including Chile will convert en masse to Mormonism,” citing an item in a Santiago newspaper on “Mormon Power.” It is not clear how this item supports Helland’s assertion. Latter-day Saints would, of course, be gratified if that were to happen, but it is doubtful that they expect it to happen “en masse,” as Helland puts it. He follows that assertion with a statement that takes the prize. “This,” he triumphantly declares, “is why Argentina was recently invaded by over twenty-thousand Mormon missionaries, about two-thirds of the Mormon overseas missionary force” (pp. 4–5). Two-thirds of the overseas missionary force invaded Argentina at one time? Wow!

Some Pleasures in Discovering the Incongruity of It All

At this point I assume that the attentive reader should be asking once again why I would bother to review a dissertation produced at Oral Roberts, of all places, by an obscure figure who probably is neither inclined nor capable of contributing significantly to the scholarly or even unscholarly literature on the Book of Mormon. One reason is that I am curious about what anti-Mormons are currently busy churning out. As I have already explained, this literature, while not intellectually significant, is the manifestation of an important social phenomenon—what Dr. Introvigne calls a new religious tradition that strives to define itself through blatant hostility towards others who are considered, rightly or wrongly, to be out of the mainstream of Christianity as that is very narrowly defined by these militant crusaders. In addition, I find this literature amusing. And, when dealing with such a literature, that is a bonus not to be overlooked. Hence, I urge the by now petulant reader to savor with me for a moment the absurdity of “over twenty-thousand Mormon missionaries” invading Argentina at one time. Please be assured that I did not make this up—that is exactly what Reverend Helland claims.

But there is more. With a little patience, one can find considerable diversion in anti-Mormon tracts. The dreadful formulaic and pedestrian character of anti-Mormon literature, the pro-

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50 This is typical of the exaggerations of the extremist faction of antimormonoids represented by Ed Decker, James R. Spencer, William J. (Bill) Schnoebeelen, and Loftes Tryk. The more moderate faction of antimormonoids is best illustrated by the late Reverend Wesley P. Walters, who generally tended to be more circumspect on such matters.
saic business of incompetents endlessly quoting each other and hence erecting an ever more rickety house of cards, the constant repetition of borrowed bromides, the clumsy proof-texting of passages lifted from the Bible, the proud confidence in possessing the orthodox religion, the abject begging for money, the hysterical hostility towards Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, both of which are often pictured by one faction of antimormonoids (a somewhat contemptuous label formulated by Professor Daniel C. Peterson) as demonic, is all rather entertaining, at least to me. Looked at in one way, such a grotesque literature—one that is such an affront to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth which these people claim to be honoring—is indeed amusing. And hence having an occasional glance at these things has become for me the adult equivalent of Saturday morning cartoons where Bullwinkle, or whoever it was, did his thing.

The downside to the comic relief provided by anti-Mormon tracts (and, in the case of “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge,” a dissertation accepted for a doctoral degree by a “university”) comes when one encounters the dreadful seriousness of those who think that they are doing God a favor by blasting away at the sincere faith of the Saints and the teachings of the prophets. These same fellows also piously boast of their having their seats already locked up in Heaven on the basis of some primitive emotional heartburn they claim to have once experienced.

But my interest in this literature goes deeper than a mild curiosity for the odd leaflet, tract, or book that happens to come along. One might even say that I am hooked on the stuff. I have even corresponded with some of those “antimormonoids.” My wife warns me about the utter futility of such behavior. And she is not mollified by my descriptions of the amusing side of anti-Mormon literature. Responding to her remonstrances and entreaties, I occasionally resolve to leave the stuff alone. But then a newsletter will arrive in the mail or a rumor will surface and I will begin to rationalize: what harm can come from having a look at some unsavory details about the latest unpleasant quarrel among the antimormonoids, or from glancing through a tract, or writing just one more letter? And then, like one who cannot pass the swinging doors of a bar, I am back into it again.51

51 There is, in addition, an informal network of Latter-day Saint aficionados who are both fascinated and amused by anti-Mormon literature. They render to each other mutual support and encouragement; they even anx-
Magic, Witchcraft, and the Occult: Chortling at the Dark Side!

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending of course on the assumptions one brings to it, Reverend Helland’s dissertation is a veritable treasure trove of amusing or embarrassing items. For example, at one point Reverend Helland describes owning a copy of *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Sage* (sic, should read Mage),52 which he says was for him the “primary source for the practice of sorcery” (p. 64). I doubt that he means that he learned the practice of sorcery from this book. Instead, he probably means that he consulted this volume to learn about the practice of sorcery so that he could figure out how Joseph Smith came up with the Book of Mormon. “The researcher kept it in his garage in order to protect his family from the evil spirits which most certainly accompanied it.”53 This

iously minister to the needs of those tempted to backslide. For example, I consult my phone messages at Brigham Young University and there it is—a message with some juicy news about still another amusing or not so amusing anti-Mormon outrage or some lurid detail about the factional warfare going on between the likes of Decker and the Tanners, and I am once again off the wagon.


53 Helland is referring to himself. With this odd book on magic stored in his garage, which he reports as being of “great value” to his dissertation, I wonder whether Reverend Helland worried about “the evil spirits which most certainly accompanied it” contaminating his automobile or perhaps even taking it for a spin at night. And I can just picture him approaching his garage with his cross in hand to protect himself from those evil spirits when he wanted to use his rake. Much like D. Michael Quinn, he sometimes refers to himself in the third person as the author of this project or project report. For comparisons, see Quinn’s bizarre personal rambling in his “On Being a Mormon Historian (And Its Aftermath),” in George D. Smith, ed., *Faithful History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 72–74, where he, for example, actually refers to himself as “this young man” (referring to his adolescent years), then to “this young historian,” “this fal-
strange book, according to Helland, “described how to summon
designated demons to do different tasks. This book confirmed
that one can recover ancient lost books by summoning a certain
demon (pp. 192–93 [of The Book of Sacred Magic of Abra-
Melon the Sage]); this book has nothing to do with Mormonism,
and therefore served as a neutral check witness [whatever that
means]. It was of great value to the project [that is, to Helland’s
project], for it confirmed that the idea behind the Book of
Mormon—recovery of an ancient lost book—is a practice of
witchcraft” (p. 64). Helland claims that “making ancient lost
books reappear also has to do with magical arts” (p. 19).

Of course, the book Helland cites does not support
Helland’s claim. In one note to the translation of The Book of
Sacred Magic the following appears: “Many ancient Books of
Magic, etc., have been lost or destroyed, in some cases by the
wish of Good Spirits, in others by the machinations of Evil
Spirits. By these Symbols [magic squares] you can have many
supposed extinct works brought to you, Abraham [aka
Abramelin the Mage or Simon of Wurzburg, a medieval cabalist
and connoisseur of magic] states; but adds that he could never
copy them, because the writing disappeared as fast as he wrote
it; notwithstanding this he was permitted to read some of
them.” Helland does not claim that Joseph Smith knew of this
exotic book or its contents. Instead, he admits that “this book
has nothing to do with Mormonism.”

Is it, I wonder, perhaps possible that Reverend Helland
believes that, with the magic squares found in The Book of
Sacred Magic in hand, one could actually conjure a demon who
would deliver a lost book? If that is not the case, then it is diffi-
cult to figure out exactly how Helland’s having found something
in a medieval manual about the magic arts helps explain Joseph
Smith and the Book of Mormon. But let us look in again on
Helland’s most intriguing suggestion—that a medieval manual
that mentions invoking spirits to conjure lost books of magic
somehow explains the Book of Mormon. Are we to believe that
Joseph Smith was able to produce an authentic ancient “lost
book” by some kind of sorcery? Or are we to believe that Joseph
Smith merely thought he was conjuring a lost book of magic

tering young historian” as he began to blossom as a controversial figure on
the fringes of the Church.

54 The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage, 193.
following some nonsense in an obscure book on magic? Is there any reason to believe that Joseph Smith had even heard of the possibility of conjuring demons to retrieve lost books of magic? If none of these, then what exactly is the point? I suppose that the point is that *The Book of Sacred Magic* links lost books, magic, and demons. And then Reverend Helland supplies the name Joseph Smith. Does not all of that somehow explain the Book of Mormon? What more could a preacher fretting about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon possibly want?

How then does Helland’s obsession with the magic arts play out in his account of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon? Well, it is certainly a significant part of his “explanation,” but not in any coherent way. Some might suggest that Reverend Helland could have benefitted from assistance by the likes of D. Michael Quinn in working out a plausible argument linking witchcraft, sorcery, the occult, magic with Joseph Smith and Mormon origins. Reverend Helland simply falls into silence after mentioning demons, lost books, magic, and Joseph Smith, while Quinn waffles in his efforts to provide a plausible explanation of the Book of Mormon.55 Looked at closely, some of Quinn’s waffles are hard to swallow.

Reverend Helland simply cannot avoid speculating about the magic arts and Joseph Smith. In one place he claims that the late Reverend Wesley P. Walters demonstrated “that [Joseph]...

55 Quinn, *Mormonism and the Magic World View*. Though he is certainly more learned than Helland, Quinn fails to provide anything like a coherent explanation of exactly how the horde of magic lore that he has assembled in his book has much of anything to do with the actual contents of the Book of Mormon. Hence, I doubt that Quinn’s book would have helped Reverend Helland sort out a coherent explanation for the Book of Mormon. Though Quinn claims to believe that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text, he has not set forth an explanation that allows that book to be true and still contain all kinds of magic that Joseph Smith was somehow able to sweep up from his immediate environment—or however he is supposed to have gotten hold of it. In addition, Quinn’s notion of what constitutes magic (and especially folk magic) is so idiosyncratic that his attempts to link Joseph Smith with magic are at least problematic, even if we assume most of what Quinn takes for granted, for example, that Joseph Smith owned a Jupiter talisman and so forth, which is iffy at best. Finally, Quinn’s book was on the market in 1987 while Helland should still have been doing his “research.” There really are problems writing a dissertation without having a look in a library. When one relies upon the likes of Ed Decker and Reverend Smith to provide all of the information, almost anything is likely to fall through the cracks.
Smith was heavily involved with witchcraft” (p. 65). What Walters actually attempted to show, though he apparently failed, is that Joseph Smith was convicted in a trial in Bainbridge, New York in 1826 of using a peep stone to defraud some of his neighbors by claiming that he could find buried treasures with it. Whatever one might think of such a practice, is the use of a seer stone an instance of witchcraft? I suppose that it depends on how one defines the word. But that is true of all those vague, emotively powerful words, for what to one person is an instance of crude magic, is to another person a manifestation of solid, historic Christianity. Unfortunately, Helland neglects to define the terms he employs in his dissertation.

At another point in his dissertation, Helland mentions a book entitled Witchcraft, Magic & Alchemy, and concludes that this book, which once again has nothing whatever to do with Joseph Smith, “pointed out that the Ancient Egyptian mysteries were quite popular among occultists” at the beginning of the nineteenth century. From this Helland leaps to the conclusion that this book “provided [him with] more support for the idea that Joseph Smith and his family were involved in witchcraft” (p. 68). But he neglects to explain exactly why such a conclusion necessarily follows from what he set out. A parallel argument will illustrate at least one problem in Helland’s reasoning. Suppose I were to cite a book on child abuse in contemporary America, and then conclude that this book “provides more support for the idea that Reverend Helland and his family are in-


involved in child abuse.” My hunch is that Reverend Helland would be able to see the flaw in that argument.

On Resonating, or Learning to Ride a Tryk

One notable feature of “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge” is that Reverend Helland is impressed by Loftes Tryk’s *The Best Kept Secrets in the Book of Mormon.* According to Helland, “Tryk was a thinker. He went deeper into the psychological and theological implications of the Book of Mormon than any other writer” (p. 43). Incidentally, the observant reader will have noticed that Helland likes to employ the past tense in his dissertation. Hence, let me repeat that sentence once again: “Tryk was a thinker.” When I first read that sentence, what occurred to me was that Tryk might have once been a thinker, but something happened to him prior to his writing *The Best Kept Secrets*, although further reflection indicated that is not what Helland had in mind. Nor does that wonderful sentence indicate that Tryk has passed on to his reward; instead, what Helland is attempting to say is that Tryk *is* a thinker—and oh what a thinker! Before the skeptical reader draws the conclusion that I have been too quick to link Helland with Tryk’s strange book as a way of mocking “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge” merely because he periodically appeals to Loftes Tryk’s prattle, or because Helland admits to being spooked by a book on magic, let me explain that from my perspective Reverend Helland seems to have at least one foot more or less solidly on the ground.

The truth is that Reverend Helland is not entirely uncritical when he approaches anti-Mormon literature or the people who fashion it, though he is genuinely enthralled by Loftes Tryk. Helland is able to sense when an anti-Mormon writer has really gone too far. And hence, to his credit, Helland has at least some reservations about people like Ed Decker and also Loftes Tryk. Hence, he only accepts half of Decker’s diatribes against Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Take the following as an example of his critical posture towards some of Tryk’s opining,

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even though he considers him a deep thinker and wants to defend him against potential criticisms: “Unfortunately, he [Tryk] took some positions that were too speculative to be taken seriously. However, his basic thrust was sound, and he deserved an audience. The author of this project report [this is the way Reverend Helland describes himself and his dissertation] resonated well with Tryk” (p. 43, emphasis supplied). Some? It would be nice to know when Tryk is not operating by the light of the moon.59 Though Helland cannot go all the way with Tryk, he “resonates” with the basic thrust in Tryk’s The Best Kept Secrets in the Book of Mormon. Tryk’s book has been shown, for a wide variety of reasons, to be one of the single worst anti-Mormon books of them all.60 Hence one should not be surprised to find Reverend Helland reporting that Tryk “proposed that Joseph Smith became demon-possessed when he had his ‘First Vision,’ and that a flash of light that emanated from him at his death was actually a physical manifestation of the departure of that ‘angel of light’ [presumably Satan or some other lesser but still nasty demon] that led him during his life” (p. 43).61 Or that “Loftes Tryk believed that there was more behind the Book of Mormon than just a young genius named Joseph Smith. He [that is, Tryk] believed it was a Satan-inspired manual designed to rob a person of his/her free agency and turn him/her into an obedient automaton state. Its product is ‘super faith.’ It is a cold, calculated effort to mold the human mind into a fanaticism that Satan can use at will, while the person thinks he/she is serving God. As Tryk pointed out, the book claims to avoid purely secular history in order to concentrate on sacred

59 In addition to The Best Kept Secrets, Tryk has produced a series of sixteen amazing articles that continue the kind of far-fetched speculation found in his book. The one nice thing about Tryk’s work is that it possesses an originality not found the typical attacks of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Tryk is not satisfied with merely mining the old glut of anti-Mormon books for another round of silly arguments. Instead, he simply invents stunning newfangled arguments that have virtually no relationship to reality. This has irritated the Tanners and others, who see his literary ventures as irresponsible and hence potentially damaging to the countercult cause.

60 See Peterson’s wonderful “A Modern Malleus maleficarum.”

61 I am sure that every Latter-day Saint will be intimately familiar with this “flash of light” business. It is part of the mythology that grew up around the killing of Joseph Smith. Tryk finds it useful, and hence he accepts the rumor uncritically.
matters. Yet it is full of war and bloodshed. This is no accident. It is an attempt to raise up an army to fight Holy Wars” (pp. 111–12, citing Tryk’s The Best Kept Secrets over and over). And according to Reverend Helland, “Tryk believes the Mormon leadership understands exactly what it has in the Book of Mormon, but is not about to discuss its findings publicly” (p. 112). Helland reports that Tryk urges “students to study the Book of Mormon to learn more about Satan. He [Tryk] describes it as ‘the most direct, concrete literary creation of Satan that is present upon the face of the earth’ ” (p. 113, cf. 73–74 for similar opinion). Since in Loftes Tryk we have clearly reached almost but not quite the outer limits of the lunatic fringe of countercult evangelical fundamentalism, nothing more can be said on the subject.

Reverend Helland is obviously fond of writers who explain Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon by invoking spooky-kooky nonsense, even fellows like Loftes Tryk—who, he also realizes, have some very serious problems—if they claim (or suggest or whatever it is that they do) that Joseph Smith or his family were demonic or that the Smiths might have been involved in some way in “the magic arts.” The attractiveness of that one notion is such that it seems to hinder Reverend Helland’s critical capacities. One wonders what Helland might have done had he gotten into Quinn’s Mormonism and the Magic World View. Be that as it may, why was Helland concerned to link Joseph Smith with the occult, magic arts and with demonic forces? Certainly not for the same reason that some revisionist Mormon historians have held that Joseph Smith must now be

62 The attentive reader will note Helland’s careful attention to gender neutrality, which he handles with unusual deftness by working in “his/her” where necessary in an effort not to offend the sensitivity of potential women readers who have had their consciousness raised about gender issues.

63 Though elsewhere Helland accepts the odd notion “that Mormon leadership does not feel much loyalty to the Book of Mormon” (p. 40). Perhaps he is generalizing from the opinions formed by his parents during their brief sojourn with the RLDS. However, they were involved with the RLDS during a period when the Book of Mormon was given attention at least in certain RLDS circles and perhaps even by some of the hierarchy and bureaucracy.

64 Introvigne offers a similar opinion on Loftes Tryk. See his “The Devil Makers.” William J. (Bill) Schnoebelen’s fantasies may constitute the absolute outer limit.
explained as having begun his career as a kind of rustic, village magician who happened to find a following, and then gradually turned himself into a "prophet" by manifesting a "religious genius" as he became a powerful "myth-maker." 65

Reverend Helland has reasons for not adopting some version of the "naturalistic explanations" of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon currently popular among revisionist historians. And his reasons are instructive. "Tying in Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon with occultism," which he thinks the Tanners, as well as Loefes Tryk and others, have succeeded in doing, "gave [him, that is, Helland] an alternative explanation for how Mormonism came about" (p. 47). But alternative to what? Well, of course, to secular and essentially psychological explanations, that is, to what are also commonly called "naturalistic explanations" by revisionist Mormon historians. 66


66 It is instructive to see exactly what form "naturalistic explanations" of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon have recently taken. In 1992, Jan Shipps republished an essay setting out the following "naturalistic explanation," which is properly labelled "naturalistic" precisely because it does not allow for the possibility that God was actually involved with Joseph Smith in the way he claimed. "It is likewise evident that beneath its crude exterior," according to Shipps, "the Book of Mormon reflects knowledge of the Bible, familiarity with theological currents, perceptions of the problems posed by Protestant denominationalism, and experience with extra-rational religious phenomena that simply are not consistent with the theory that its religious framework was an afterthought." Shipps is responding to details in the "naturalistic explanation" advanced by Fawn M. Brodie. Shipps thereby distances herself from some of the specific features of Brodie's account, as she advances her own "naturalistic explanation." "Such a position," according to Shipps, "requires a greater leap of faith than accepting a naturalist explanation which holds (p. 1) that Joseph grew up in a family fascinated with religion; (p. 2) that . . . he thoroughly searched the scriptures . . .; (p. 3) . . . he did have a vision or go through some other non-rational experience . . .; (p. 4) that in the throes of revivalistic excitement he . . . inquire[d] about the matter a second time, thereby stimulating a second vision around 1824; (p. 5) that . . . in connection with his money-digging activities, he actually found some Indian artifacts, or hoped to do so, which inspired the writing of the Book of Mormon. Leaving aside the ques-
Since Helland is nothing if not religious and perhaps just a tad superstitious—remember he kept a book in his garage because he was certain it was accompanied by evil spirits and he is, after all, a Pentecostal preacher—secular, naturalistic explanations of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon are not to his liking; he wants something really potent—he wants what would count as an decisive religious explanation, what can best be described as a "supernatural explanation," but one in which Satan, not God, plays the crucial role. He therefore assumes that a religious or "supernatural explanation" will partake of what to Latter-day Saints will seem a spooky-kooky dimension. In my phone conversation with Reverend Helland, he was not the least shy about insisting that Joseph Smith was satanic. Now that is the kind of religious explanation that has some teeth in it.

According to Helland, "if its claim [presumably the prophetic claims of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon] of being divinely inspired were to be answered, then an alternative explanation should be offered" (p. 47). "The secular approach would offer a psychological alternative. The religious approach would take occultism into consideration" (p. 47). But not in the sense that some people might believe in the occult, but that what is talked about and done as part of the occult is reality. And since Helland preaches the orthodox religion, he opts for explaining Joseph Smith as demonic and the Book of Mormon as a product of the occult, of sorcery, witchcraft, and the magic arts, and hence as a satanic manual, since he refers with approval to Loftes Tryk's outrageous claims to that effect. Helland does not, however, follow through on any of this in anything like a coherent manner. But at least we can see why, as he puts it, he "resonates well" with the likes of Tryk and Decker, despite the fact that he also is fond of the Tanners, who simply cannot tolerate those other fellows.67

Some of the more or less sophisticated explanations by critics of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon tend to be "naturalistic," while the religiously motivated, sectarian anti-Mormon explanations tend to waffle between a thoroughgoing

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67 See Peterson's "A Modern Malleus maleficarum" for some amusing details about the complicated relationships between factions of anti-Mormons.
“super-naturalistic” account and essentially “naturalistic” explanations. However, both the “naturalistic” and “super-naturalistic” accounts compete with the way the Latter-day Saints see things from within the horizon of faith. But these explanations, though often complementary, also challenge with each other, as Reverend Helland discovered, when on September 25, 1985 he interviewed John White, a Stanford University Ph.D. candidate in archeology, who explained that he rejected both the Bible and the Book of Mormon for essentially the same reason—they were both written by people who “thought they were speaking for God” (p. 71), which is absurd at least from a naturalistic perspective. Like evangelical fundamentalists generally, Reverend Helland sees the threat to his faith primarily from what he considers cults that somehow distort the truth under the direct or indirect inspiration of Satan. He is much less concerned with defending his account of “historic Christianity” from ideologies that brush aside all prophetic truth claims, including those associated with Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. He hardly notices the profound indifference to talk about divine things from skeptics in thrall to an essentially “naturalistic” understanding of human experience. What Reverend Helland does not realize is that, when caught in the traffic of modernity, riding a Tryk can be every bit as ridiculous and even more dangerous than accepting the Book of Mormon for what it is—the word of God.

Evangelical or Agnostic?—The Triple-Minded Tryk

It would be a mistake, however, to insist on a rigid distinction between what I have called naturalistic and the new anti-Mormon “super-naturalistic” explanations of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. As I have shown, Reverend Helland often draws upon arguments in his attack on the Book of Mormon that are clearly naturalistic and hence perfectly acceptable to those with little or no religious yearnings. This can be seen, for example, when he turns to the so-called Spaulding-Rigdon explanation of the Book of Mormon. And even his insistence that Joseph Smith was a magician, deeply into witchcraft and the occult, could very well constitute at its heart a kind of naturalistic explanation, which with certain appropriate modifications is advanced by some secularized critics of Joseph Smith. Even when the Reverend Helland borrows from Loftes Tryk the notion that Joseph Smith was a victim of demonic possession and hence
that the Book of Mormon is "Satan's real masterpiece" and bears "Satan's trademark" and so forth, Tryk is merely giving an essentially naturalistic argument a somewhat more bizarre wrinkle by including Satan as the ultimate though not entirely the proximate cause of the Book of Mormon.68

Those who know Loftes Tryk and his amazing Best Kept Secrets in the Book of Mormon from Daniel C. Peterson's insightful and entertaining review,69 or from Massimo Introvigne's critical assessment,70 or now from Reverend Helland's "resonating," will assume that they are confronted by an unstable, former Latter-day Saint who has been "born-again" as an evangelical fundamentalist and who has an uncontrollable urge to attribute to Satan all the things he considers evil. That judgment is perhaps about half right. Tryk's book contains much that is autobiographical. Some might conclude that Best Kept Secrets is a thinly veiled psychobiography. For example, at age thirteen, that is, in 1959, he became a Latter-day Saint, later served as a missionary, was sealed in the Salt Lake Temple and so forth.71 But by 1981 he faced reality—"coming to terms with his beliefs and doubts," he finally "had to admit that he was less certain than ever about God. He had become an agnostic." But then, he claims, "a powerful spiritual experience restored his faith in Jesus Christ," after which he wrote what he describes with less than a full show of modesty as "this most unusual and scholarly analysis ever presented on the origins and meaning of the Book of Mormon."72 It is therefore not surprising to dis-

68 For such language, see Tryk, Best Kept Secrets in the Book of Mormon, 87, 121; cf. also similar and related language at 76, 84–85, 95–96, 98–99, 105, 107, 137, 154, 157–58, 162, 175, 177, 183, 222.
69 Peterson, "A Modern Malleus maleficarum."
71 Tryk is silent about his wife and children, though there are hints that the course he has chosen has complicated his life in that regard. In Best Kept Secrets he neglects to explain or even mention his eighteen months in prison in California. But see his "An Infinite Argument against the Book of Mormon," Jacob's Well Report 38/5 (no date). There he almost inadvertently describes his prison stay as "a consequence of rationalizing that I had once done with respect to the law, and which in turn was generated entirely by views and values I had been introduced to . . . as a Mormon." In order to blame the Church, he piles rationalizations upon rationalizations. But he also thereby reveals something about himself.
72 Tryk, Best Kept Secrets, 249 (but unnumbered)—biographical note at the end of his book.
cover that *Best Kept Secrets* is larded with passages from the Bible that are quite reminiscent of the proof-texting of evangelical fundamentalists.\(^{73}\) And why not? "The Bible is the only complete written word of God."\(^ {74}\) Can we not assume that Tryk was “born-again”? That seems to be what he wants his readers to assume.

And, if so, what then of the Book of Mormon? Tryk insists that “anti-Mormons appear to be too polite, calling it a book of false scripture. It is fully the most direct, concrete literary creation of Satan.”\(^ {75}\) It is that opinion, and the supporting reasoning—if that is the appropriate description for the contents of *Best Kept Secrets*—that led the Tanners (those shadows of reality who operate the anti-Mormon Utah Lighthouse Ministry) to decline to endorse or promote Tryk’s book.\(^ {76}\) It also led Massimo Introvigne to place Tryk directly in the center of a “lunatic fringe of a movement” directed against Latter-day Saints which “believes that the real author of the Book of Mormon is Satan, not Joseph Smith,”\(^ {77}\) and also that led both Peterson and Introvigne to characterize Tryk’s writings as a manifestation of an outlandish faction of anti-Mormons which includes Decker, Schnoebelen and Spencer. This faction is currently sluging it out with the stolid old main-line anti-Mormonism advanced by the Tanners and their associates who sense that all that bizarre talk about Satan will not set well with rational people.

Tryk seems to have been deeply disappointed by the negative reception his book received from anti-Mormons like the Tanners. Indeed, he is annoyed by criticism from whatever direction. For example, “I invite,” he recently wrote, “criticism every bit as nasty as my own, but at least [I] try to be intelligent. There was some guy named Daniel Peterson . . . who’s [sic] review of my book looked more like a Fast Sunday’s upchuck.”\(^ {78}\) Of course, Tryk neglected to confront Peterson’s arguments. And, he later wrote, “once a half-cocked Italiano, a Dr. Introvigne, started asking me for copies of the Jacob’s Well

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\(^{73}\) Ibid., 4, 5, 17, 26, 41, 57, etc.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 139.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 222.

\(^{76}\) See Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Serious Charges against the Tanners: Are the Tanners Demonized Agents of the Mormon Church?* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1991), 2–6.


\(^{78}\) Letter from Loftes Tryk to Louis Midgley, dated 18 April 1993.
Reports, only to dub me later as part of a ‘lunatic fringe of counter-Mormonism.’”79

Tryk is, to put it mildly, sensitive about criticism at least in part because he has a very high opinion of his Best Kept Secrets—it is his credo and in it flows his life’s blood. And he also sees himself as different from and superior to the stable of writers that dominate anti-Mormon propaganda. “I am,” he claims, “no sectarian hatchet man, nor a hurt person trying to get even,”80 though his writings contain abundant signs of a deep resentment of his former Church and its foundations. In response to Professor Peterson’s criticism of his work, he claims that he is “not a ‘New Age Anti-Mormon.’ I’m not an Old Age anti-Mormon. I only want those goodly people [the Latter-day Saints?] to see what they have been sucked into.”81 With “those goodly people” in mind as his target audience, Tryk blasts away at the Book of Mormon with an array of arguments most of which have never been seen before. “Criticism of anybody’s book of scripture,” he correctly notes, “is sure to become an emotional issue, and anything that is stated here relative to the author or about the book itself should be accepted as that: relative and in the perspective from which it is offered.”82 That caveat is hardly necessary, since we assume that he is telling us what he thinks. And we do not have to read more than a few lines before his biases and assumptions begin to come into focus.

But exactly what is his perspective? Is it that of a once deeply disillusioned, agnostic former Latter-day Saint who has now become a “born-again” evangelical—who has found the “real Jesus” in a powerful, emotional experience? We are quite familiar with that kind. But, by his own admission, that is not exactly the truth about Loftes Tryk. His most recent explanation for his Best Kept Secrets is that, “though probably seeming to have been written by a fundamentalist Christian, [it] was written as it was primarily in the hope of scraping together support for its publication—as are many, many books (which you must surely understand). Not for the remuneration hoped for [from] desired sales, mind you, but simply for fitting into a receptive

80 Tryk, Best Kept Secrets, 3.
82 Tryk, “A Post Graduate Course in the Book of Mormon,” The Jacob’s Well Bulletin (Spring 1991): 2. (The usual title for this series of tracts is “Jacob’s Well Reports.”)
audience's frame of reference. I wasn't being quite dishonest, there, either, as I was working out my world views at the time, and was somewhat in that mood. 83 What mood? An evangelical born-again mood? What he leaves unsaid is that his Best Kept Secrets is not entirely forthright. He seems to justify just a little dissembling if not deception—about his own religious stance, for example—to reach "those goodly people" who are being harmed by deceptions in the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon, according to Tryk, trains even casual readers to endure emotional "Yo-Yo rides" as part of its intentionally self-destructive impact on the psyche; it causes people to be manic-depressive, or bi-polar, with suicidal tendencies. "When you have been trained to do this kind of thing on your own they call you a manic-depressive. The suicide rate is unusually high for people with that disorder." 84 Or, the Book of Mormon is "a poor source of inspiration for those who suffer from depression cycles." 85

Though I am confident that most readers will not have noticed such a thing, what really makes people bi-polar, according to Tryk, is the powerful sexual imagery in the Book of Mormon. That book "is picking you apart to sort your weaknesses out." And Tryk does not like that one little bit. One potent way the Book of Mormon works its sinister magic is through an abundance of erotica. I am serious—that is exactly what Tryk claims. For those who have not noticed an abundance of sexual imagery in that book, Tryk draws their attention, for example, to Lehi's dream about his rod of iron which is nothing less than a phallus for him, 86 and to the sweet white fruit that he sees as the female genitalia and on and on and on—but enough is enough. 87

84 Tryk, "A Post Graduate Course," 8.
85 Ibid.
86 Tryk’s opinion might be compared with a passage from an author who has recently shown a fascination with the phallus as a symbolic token of male dominance and power in the Latter-day Saint community; see David Knowlton, "On Mormon Masculinity," Sunstone 16/2 (August 1992): 25. Knowlton’s speculations, though more clearly based on varieties of currently fashionable social science, are not better grounded than those of Loftes Tryk.
87 At this point it becomes obvious that Tryk’s essays, like the work of Reverend Helland, illustrate the dangers inherent in a skeptical hermeneutic that assumes that what is found on the surface of a text is not what it means or was intended by its author, and that what was intended or
After discovering that the evangelical anti-Mormon fringe—except for the likes of Ed Decker—was not enthralled by his *Best Kept Secrets*, in part because it made too much even for their taste of Satan’s presumed role in writing the Book of Mormon, Tryk seems to have turned back more to essentially psychological and in that sense naturalistic arguments not entirely unlike the highly secularized approach of Fawn Brodie’s anti-Mormon explanations.88 “There are so many sexual image

what the texts means is not what is said. When looking for subtle clues in a text, it is wise to remain close to the surface, and not allow the text to become a springboard for the imagination or a vehicle for vindicating some fashionable theory or even personal animosities. Some of the best, though by no means the only, skeptical hermeneutical assumptions about texts or text analogues were set in place by Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, especially in their treatments of “religion,” meaning, for them and their followers, the illusions or delusions to which someone else is bound, of course. And from Freud our culture has acquired a sophistical intellectual apparatus by which to “discern” hidden sexual elements floating under the surface of texts and text analogues such as dreams. Tryk is working with just such a paradigm, whether he knows it or not. For other similar psychoanalytic and specifically Jungian interpretations of Joseph Smith, see Jess and David Groesbeck, “Joseph Smith and the Shaman’s Vision: A Psychoanalytic Exploration in Mormonism,” an unpublished paper read at the Sunstone Theological Symposium in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1985; Jess Groesbeck, “Joseph Smith and His Path of Individuation: A Psychoanalytic Exploration in Mormonism,” an unpublished paper read at the Sunstone Theological Symposium in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1986; “A Psycho-historical Study of the First Mormon Family—The Smiths and Their Dreams and Visions,” an unpublished paper read at the Sunstone Theological Symposium in Los Angeles, California, in 1987; “The Smiths and Their Dreams and Visions: A Psycho-Historical Study of the First Mormon Family,” *Sunstone* 12/2 (March 1988): 22-29; “Joseph Smith and His Nauvoo Dreams,” an unpublished paper read for Groesbeck at the June 1990 Mormon History Association meeting in Laie, Hawaii.88 For example, for a period of time Fawn Brodie belonged to the Los Angeles Interdisciplinary Psychoanalytic Study Group, which consisted of prominent members of the psychoanalytic community, along with some political scientists and historians. When they considered Joseph Smith, they concluded, according to Brodie’s notes, that Joseph Smith, “in his operation as a child . . . was saved by amputation (castration) by his mother,” and also the “Gods (the angel) showed Joseph Smith a sword (the phallus); a breast-plate and two stones (the mother); and the golden plates (the anal element).” See Brodie, “Original Notes First J. S. Meetings and Greenacre,” “Joseph Smith—(first meeting),” in Brodie Papers, MS 360, bx. 8, fld. 2, in the
elements present” in the Book of Mormon, according to one of Tryk’s most recent rantings, “that we can confidently assume that they were intended as such.”89 After having his Best Kept Secrets fall flat on its face with most of the evangelical anti-Mormon crowd, Tryk seems to have shifted away from his obsessive assertions about the Book of Mormon bearing Satan’s signature to a somewhat more naturalistic version of his opining.

It appears that Tryk’s pious mood has passed, at least for the time-being, or his evangelical gambit has from his perspective failed, but his resentment of the Book of Mormon continues unabated. Now, according to Tryk, “Joseph earned all the credit for having written the book that bears the brand marks of his character throughout.” Instead of Satan’s book, “it is so singularly Joseph’s book that it is difficult to conceive anyone else even having a hand in it.”90 That is clearly more in line with an agnostic stance than the pious “born-again” persona presented in Best Kept Secrets. Tryk was on the move again. He is nothing if not volatile in his changing moods.

In 1991, the Book of Mormon was being pictured by Tryk as the product of the genius of Joseph Smith—of his “great imagination, wit, and genius.” He had a photographic memory. His command of the Bible and the soon-to-be text of the Book of Mormon was “word perfect” because he “memorized great portions of the Bible.” “His was hyper-intelligence.”91 Joseph Smith “could easily have had the most prodigious intellect around.” And, of course, he “had the Bible memorized from one end to the other.” He therefore could “compose the entire Book

Marriott Library Special Collections at the University of Utah. See Gary F. Novak, “Naturalistic Assumptions and the Book of Mormon,” BYU Studies 30/3 (Summer 1990): 29–30, 38 n. 38. For an elaborate development of the notion that Joseph Smith can be wholly explained as responding to the surgery he experienced as a youth in which he was presumably treated by a symbolic castration, see a paper read by William D. Morain of the Dartmouth University Medical School, entitled “The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith, Jr., and the Unconscious,” read on 22 May 1993 at the Mormon History Association meetings in Lamoni, Iowa.

89 Tryk, “A Post Graduate Course,” 9. For more exotica about alleged erotica in the Book of Mormon, see 9–10.
90 Ibid., 4. For similar language see 1–2, 5–6, 11–12.
91 Ibid., 12.
of Mormon in his memory, before he ever sat down to dictate a word of it."92

Tryk thus fashioned a tale of an evil genius who had such prodigious powers that virtually any literary feat was well within his command. But what about Satan? Where had he gone? Well, he is still there, but as a mere figure of speech. "It is as if he [Joseph Smith] had the devil on his shoulder."93 So the Satan stuff takes on a more figurative role, and what Tryk thinks he has fashioned is a "new concept of Joseph Smith as a furtive genius." Hence Tryk can talk about "his great masterpiece" at some length without the necessity of invoking Satan to get the evil packed into the Book of Mormon.94 But Tryk has not shifted entirely to a thoroughgoing naturalistic account, with the "super-natural" stuff left out—he still lets Satan back in just a little or a lot, depending upon which issue of his "Jacob's Well Report" one is reading. For example, in a recent issue, Tryk insists that "linking Satan with those 'scriptures' unique to the LDS movement is at the crux of most every issue related to Mormonism. . . . Other theories of LDS scripture authority will always fail to explain a more able source of their malicious brilliance. But then," he adds, "the naturalistic argument, which may completely omit the Satanic factor, is equally appealing to the sympathies of a public which has become recently more wary of how dangerous Cults are."95

Whether this nod in the direction of naturalistic explanations for Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon is condescension to the "goodly people" whom he sees being harmed by the Book of Mormon or to the evangelical elements that he hopes will buy and then promote his views is not entirely clear. Be that as it may, Tryk finally cannot restrain his fascination with Satanic speculations: "the historical character who went by the name of Joseph Smith may not have been the mind behind the mask at all." Why not? Because the figure that Tryk has conjured is of such "malevolent brilliance" that he goes beyond what could come "from any nightmare out of his twisted mind." And hence Joseph Smith's "very existence as an autonomous human being has to be questioned, though he had a human body, to be

92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
sure.” Tryk then wonders “if some other, more sinister and dynamic spirit didn’t begin to control the body that once belonged to him.”96 So the volatile Tryk vacillates between modes of explanation—now this and now that, but always with his bizarre assumptions yielding horrendous conclusions.

Could the chameleon Loftes Tryk be playing a lofty trick upon his readers? Perhaps, but what seems authentic in his passionate opining is the bold language of resentment, which proves nothing about the object of his resentment, other than the emotional intensity which it generates in his own psyche, but for reasons which he neglects to make entirely clear. His writing seem to me to be telling us far more about Loftes Tryk than about the texts he is purporting to be scrutinizing. And perhaps for that reason, his array of very inventive, sometimes entirely novel arguments against Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon seem unstable—they ebb and flow in various naturalistic or super-naturalistic guises. And though they were attractive to Reverend Helland, it is also obvious why he could not accept the full load of Tryk’s venom. Helland was satisfied to find an authority who talked about a relatively simple case of demonic possession—a rather common thing, at least from the point of view of a Pentecostal preacher. Otherwise, Tryk fired too many weapons to be entirely convincing even to the rather uncritical and receptive Reverend Helland, though he was sufficiently close to Ed Decker’s view of the Book of Mormon to get a sympathetic hearing.

**Decker**

Reverend Helland’s relationship with Ed Decker is one of the more intriguing and even crucial elements in “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge.” Helland, as I will demonstrate,

96 Tryk, “A Post Graduate Course.” 13. It is notable that rough psychological and sociological speculation forms the bulk of Tryk’s argument. It is only when he has manufactured with the help of such speculation a figure of such immense evil proportions that this image is no longer believable, that Tryk begins to soar around by the light of the moon by opining that Joseph Smith was “Satan’s prophet.” “Whether Satan merely inspired Joseph through some telepathic means, or actually possessed and inhabited his body, it probably makes little difference. In either case, Joseph must have participated voluntarily.” Finally, “it isn’t beyond reason to make that conclusion,” he opines, “as almost the same thing happens daily among his temple worthy followers.” Ibid.
goes at least half way with Decker. Hence the title of this review. First of all, Reverend Helland is proud of having hosted Decker on his 1982 visit to Chile, but he also expresses some embarrassment about Decker’s rhetorical onslaught against Latter-day Saints. And those few passages in which Reverend Helland distances himself on basically prudential grounds from Decker’s invectives against the Church of Jesus Christ are the high points in his otherwise dismal doctoral dissertation—they also provide the justification for his “project” in which he proposes a somewhat less harsh substitute for Decker-like diatribe.

Reverend Helland claims that Decker’s visit to Chile had several consequences. First, it led to the public denunciation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints “as non-Christian” by “both the Protestant clergy and the Roman Catholic Church.” That much could have been predicted. Such people are sufficiently aware of their own self-interest to avoid endorsing competing churches. And Latter-day Saints are sufficiently realistic not to expect wholesale endorsements from sectarian clergy. But the clergy in Chile, according to Helland, were whipped into an anti-Mormon frenzy by Decker—they went on the war path. Helland applauds such intemperate outbursts of religious bigotry. But something else seems to have happened in Chile after 1982 that apparently troubled Reverend Helland and eventually led to “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge.” According to Helland, Marxist terrorists started bombing Latter-day Saint chapels some two years after Decker’s visit to Chile. “The author of this project,” he admits, “believed that this unanticipated participation by terrorists in combating Mormonism could have been sparked at least in part by some of the things which were exposed in Decker’s teachings” (p. 2). According to Helland, Decker augmented his usual distortions about the Church by “emphasizing its more bizarre aspects,” by which Helland means that Decker included allegations about “its involvement in the FBI, the CIA and international politics. This approach naturally enraged the Chilean citizens” (p. 2).97 And Decker’s partisan political rhetoric presumably led to violence by terrorists against the Church. Troubled by this violence, though

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97 Believe it or not, even Harold Bloom, the highly respected Yale University and New York University literary critic, makes similar charges against the Latter-day Saints. See his The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 67, 90.
not especially concerned about the truth of what Decker said, which was more or less taken for granted, Reverend Helland eventually came to see the need for a way to “streamline” assaults on the Saints and thereby presumably “enable Christian workers to win Mormons to Christ with a minimum of elements which might inflame the Marxist terrorists.” His plan, apparently worked out after 1984, when the violence in Chile began, was to focus the Pentecostal attack on the Restored Gospel as found in the Book of Mormon and to cease repeating Decker’s absurd charges that Latter-day Saint missionaries were agents of American imperialism and so forth. Instead of spreading such stories, Reverend Helland devised a plan to equip Chilean Pentecostals, as he puts it, “to educate the Mormons about the Book of Mormon” (p. 3). This supposed “education” was intended to unhinge the faith of Latter-day Saints, and “after a Mormon’s faith in Mormonism was broken, the Christian worker then would be in a position to lead the ex-Mormon to Christ. This would,” in Reverend Helland’s estimation, “heighten the intellectual level of the approach used against Mormonism.” And he might be right in the sense that what he proposed, though atrocious nonsense, is superior to the earlier anti-Mormon ranting of Ed Decker. Helland hoped that his project would not attract “the attention of the Marxist terrorists” (p. 3). In other words, post-Decker attacks on the Restored Gospel should, from Reverend Helland’s perspective, be focused virtually exclusively on the Book of Mormon.

Reverend Helland’s “project” is thus an attempt to defend that proposition and to test the effectiveness of a pamphlet he wrote to attack the Book of Mormon in an effort to “educate” Latter-day Saints and thereby bring them to the “real Jesus.” “This project,” he claims, “had as its premise that if Christian workers knew about the errors of the Book of Mormon, they could be more effective in winning Mormons to Christ” (p. 31). “The first chapter of this project report suggested that the terrorists element may have felt encouraged to attack the Mormon Church by some of the things that were brought to light in 1982 by the visit to Chile of Ed Decker, President of ‘Ex-Mormons for Jesus’ [now generally known as Saints Alive in Jesus]. These terrorist attacks showed the need for a more intellectual, less inflammatory approach in dealing with Mormonism, and created the need for this project” (p. 63).

Unfortunately, though troubled by the possibility that terrorists were encouraged to attack Latter-day Saints and their
properties by Ed Decker, Reverend Helland cannot understand that virtually all of Decker’s views on Latter-day Saints are obscene and absurd. Hence, his only real objection to Decker’s approach is that in Chile it might have sparked terrorist attacks on the Church. Helland’s slurs on the Book of Mormon and his comments about Joseph Smith, the Restored Gospel, and Latter-day Saints are not less distortions than are those emanating from Ed Decker. Hence, virtually every page of “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge” cries out for a response.

Avoiding the Trap Set for Others

In addition to being an instance of shoddy scholarship, Reverend Helland’s “project” suggests the possibility that he may have had other unstated reasons for shifting away from the approach of Ed Decker in his own offensive against the gospel of Jesus Christ as understood by Latter-day Saints. It is possible that, by attempting to focus on the Book of Mormon and ignore the more bizarre aspects of Decker’s appeal to anti-American sentiments, Helland was aware that Pentecostal churches are themselves targets for terrorists who want to strike out at signs of an American presence in Latin America.98

The spectrum of Pentecostal churches is seen by political fanatics in Latin America as American intrusions on their soil. If Reverend Helland is correct that the visit of Ed Decker to Chile helped trigger outbreaks of anti-American terrorism, then it might have also occurred to him that the Pentecostal churches felt some of the fury Decked helped unleash on Latter-day Saints. The fact is that the Pentecostal churches were born and bred in the United States—they are at least as American as other manifestations of evangelical fundamentalism. And like these and other American churches, they are of rather recent vintage. Hence, down-playing the anti-American rhetoric implicit in Decker’s war on Latter-day Saints may be a prudent policy for a Pentecostal whose church is threatened by the very violence the Reverend Helland takes at least some credit for having let loose

98 “The bombings of Mormon churches in Chile,” according to Helland, “began in July of 1984.” He adds: “As you can see in my dissertation, by 1990, over 200 Mormon chapels had been damaged by bombs. As I told you on the phone, some Pentecostal and other Protestant churches have suffered similar damage, but not in the systematic and destructive manner suffered by the Mormon Church” (letter from Helland to Midgley, dated 29 March 1993).
by bringing Decker to Chile to disrupt Latter-day Saint missionary activity.

Reverend Helland urged a shift away from telling potential Pentecostal converts that Latter-day Saint missionaries are agents of American imperialism. That shift might have been calculated to serve his own self-interests. In an ironic way, if he is correct about Decker’s impact in Chile—which I doubt—he may have helped create an evil that threatens his own church. Be that as it may, there is little sign of remorse for the distortions spread by Decker, only shock at what he assumes to have been some unintended consequences of Decker’s outbursts.

**Helland’s Chiding of the Book of Mormon**

A nice thing about Helland’s annotated review of what he claims to be the significant literature on the Book of Mormon—certainly he would not have intentionally failed to include any item he thought was significant—is that his annotations reveal much of the ground for his approach to Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. For example, Helland seems enthralled with a book entitled *The Golden Bible; or, The Book of Mormon, Is it From God?* This book was written by Reverend M. T. Lamb, a Baptist minister in Salt Lake City, and was originally published in 1887.99 In his pamphlet attacking the Book of Mormon, Helland cites Lamb more than a dozen times; he takes that old book as definitive on various issues relating to the Book of Mormon. For example, Helland is certain that there are numerous “glaring errors” in the Book of Mormon which could still be corrected by additional editing. Two examples will exemplify Helland’s reliance upon Lamb. Helland quotes (or misquotes) Alma 43:38: “While on the other hand, there was not [sic—the correct word is *now*] and then a man fell among the Nephites, by their swords and the loss of blood, they being shielded from the more vital parts of the body, or the more vital parts of the body being shielded from the strokes of the Lamanites, by their breastplates,” and so forth. Helland, following Reverend Lamb, comments as follows: “it is difficult to imagine being attacked in pitched battle by ‘the more vital parts’ of one’s body” (p. 165).

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99 And more recently reprinted by the Tanners through their Utah Lighthouse Ministry. Helland is fond of Reverend Lamb’s book and tends to follow it on a number of cultural, archaeological, and anthropological matters (pp. 173–74, for example), as well as matters relating to the Bible (pp. 147, 151, 168, for example).
But that is not how the Book of Mormon reads. Granted that the passage under consideration is awkward, it is not nonsensical, as is the comment by Helland, following Reverend Lamb. Nothing in that passage suggests that Nephites were “attacked...by” the vital parts of their bodies, but that their more vital parts were shielded from blows delivered by the Lamanites.

One of the old chestnuts of anti-Mormon attacks on the Book of Mormon is the charge that the book cannot be an authentic ancient text because it contains the word “adieu,” which everyone presumably knows is a French word. Thus, according to Helland, “critics have long wondered why the French word ‘adieu’ appears in the Book of Mormon, when the golden plates were supposed to have been translated into English” (p. 151, citing Reverend Lamb, of course). But does everyone know that the word “adieu” is French? Most certainly not. Some claim that the word “adieu” is a late Middle English word, fashioned initially out of Latin and borrowed to be sure from Old French. Furthermore the word “adieu” appears in the 1828 edition of Webster’s Dictionary. It turns out that those who think that the word is English apparently know something about the English language. So what exactly is the problem with having an English word used in an English translation? Well, for one thing a Baptist minister in 1887 was busy “scoring” the “use of adieu in an English translation when that word was French” (p. 56). And Reverend Helland follows Reverend Lamb slavishly on that matter. Incidentally, this kind of complaint is typical of the kinds of things Reverend Helland employs to discredit Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon; sorry folks, it simply does not get much better than his comments on “adieu.” Oh, how I would like to say adieu to the silly anti-Mormon game of complaining about its presence in the Book of Mormon.

Clearly, Reverend Helland is nothing if not confident in his refutation of the Book of Mormon. I will provide just a sample of his comments, for purposes of illustration:

1. He states that Mary, the mother of Jesus of Nazareth, is described in the Book of Mormon as “fair and white.” This offends him. And he asks: “Why did the Virgin Mary have to be

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so fair and white? Why could she not be plain like most other virgins?” (p. 103). No comment is necessary.

2. He is amused by the appearance of the name Sam in the Book of Mormon, and takes its presence there as evidence that the book is not an authentic ancient text. “The name Sam,” Helland opines, “seems strangely out of place here. It fits Joseph Smith’s brother much better in the nineteenth century than a Jewish lad six hundred years before Christ” (p. 97). In addition, Helland devotes an entire though brief section of his chapter on “The Book of Mormon Challenge” to the question: “Sam: Hebrew or American?” (p. 90). “Sam is the English nickname for Samuel. Samuel is a Hebrew name found in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 1:20). By doing a minimum of checking, one learns that Joseph Smith had a brother named Samuel” (p. 90). That constitutes his entire argument. He certainly did a minimum of checking, for there is no indication that he checked to see whether Joseph Smith was in the habit of referring to his younger brother by the nickname Sam, or whether Sam is an authentic Hebrew name. Hence, Helland does not provide textual evidence that Joseph Smith actually used the nickname Sam to refer to Samuel Harrison Smith, his younger brother.101 On the other hand, Sam is a perfectly good Hebrew, Arabic, or Egyptian name, appearing in both Hebrew and Arabic as Sam or Shem, depending on differences in dialect.102

3. Helland is outraged by the suggestion in the Book of Mormon that the People of God would employ any form of Egyptian script to write divine revelations or their history (pp.

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102 For evidence of the presence of the name Sam among Hebrews in antiquity, see Nibley’s *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites*, vol. 5 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 42, citations at 136, and also evidence of Sam as in the Egyptian name Sam Tawi, a name taken by the brother of Nehri as he ascended the throne. Versions of Nibley’s *Lehi in the Desert* have been around since 1957.
He accepts the fact that Jews translated their sacred texts into Greek, but insists that they would not have dared to translate anything into Egyptian. One reason is that "Jews did not speak Egyptian" (p. 84). Ever? And to even think of the sacred texts being written in Egyptian “goes against all reason” (p. 83). Why? In addition, he claims “that both Egyptian hieroglyphics and hieretic [sic—hieratic?] writing require more space than Hebrew” (p. 84), and hence would not have functioned as a kind of shorthand, though he provides no evidence for any of these bald assertions. I am not inclined to quarrel with most of these assertions because I suspect that he knows no more about Egyptian than I do. I must, however, point out that, on the question of whether or not Jews ever used the Egyptian language to express what is in their scriptures, Helland seems to be wrong. There are at least what appear to be a few instances of Jews using Egyptian to inscribe biblical materials.103

4. Helland mocks Latter-day Saint efforts to account for the effects of an oath made by Nephi in placating Zoram as that is reported in 1 Nephi 4:36–37 (p. 99). Helland doubts that such an oath would "give Nephi peace of mind," and would have led to an escape by Zoram, which "would endanger Nephi's life and the lives of his family" (p. 99). Then he quotes, from the 1981 CES Book of Mormon Student Manual, two brief passages concerning the power of certain oaths “among desert people and their descendants” taken from something written by Hugh Nibley. Helland comments as follows: "This assertion by Hugh Nibley sounds fine, but is irrelevant. In no place does the Book of Mormon say Zoram was an Arab. Nor does it ever mention any origin other than Israel for the American Indian" (p. 100). Helland considers the three sentences he quotes from Nibley to constitute “an overreaction of the Mormon leaders to try to shore up this weak point with a totally undocumented declaration” (p. 100). Granted, no documentation was included with the passage.

103 See, for example, Charles F. Nims and Richard C. Steiner, “A Paganized Version of Psalm 20:2–6 from the Aramaic Text in demotic Script,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 103 (1983): 261–74. This particular text was written in demotic script, but was unintelligible to demoticists until it was realized that it was written in Aramaic with demotic symbols. See also Raymond A. Bowman, “An Aramaic Religious Text in Demotic Script,” Journal of Near Eastern Studies 3 (1944): 219–31. And see also J. W. Crowfoot and G. M. Crowfoot, “The Ivories from Sumaria,” Palestine Exploration Fund (1933): 12–13, for a different example of the same practice.
from Nibley as it appeared in the CES manual, but, if Helland had checked the source from which it was taken, he would have found ample documentation.104

Supporting these complaints against the Book of Mormon is an even more remarkable collection of strange remarks. One nice feature of “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge” is that its author, prior to revealing his enthrallment with Loffes Tryk’s bizarre speculation, provided a convenient summary of his complaints against the Book of Mormon (pp. 110–11). This saves me the task of trying to provide my own summary. However, before Reverend Helland offered his abstract, he insisted that the problems he located in the Book of Mormon “are of the subtle type, not readily discernable to the layman” (p. 110). Elsewhere Reverend Helland pounds home this point by referring to someone who “also pointed out that its policy of unpaid ministry has caused the Mormon Church to be severely handicapped when it comes to producing experts on Mormonism. Its leaders are amateurs. None of them can speak authoritatively” (p. 44). And, hence, without a professional, paid clergy—one trained for the ministry in the orthodox religion—Latter-day Saints are simply at a loss to respond to the powerful criticisms of anti-Mormon professional clergy. The “Mormon leadership attempts to control the thinking of its faithful” (p. 72). Hence, “the Mormon is afraid to think for himself when it comes to religion” (p. 75).

Reverend Helland thus claims that with his training for the ministry he has somehow cut through all the obfuscation and is able to bring to light the reality hidden beneath the surface. And he finds that the Book of Mormon has the following problems, which I will list with his numbering and in his words, but with the punctuation modified and in sentences to increase the clarity. I have also provided some responses, where I could not restrain myself:

1. The Book of Mormon manifests “uncertainty as to the language the Book of Mormon was written in—Egyptian or Hebrew.”

2. The Book of Mormon manifests “oblique contradictions of the Bible.” That is, it seems to contradict the way the Bible is read by contemporary evangelical fundamentalists.

3. The Book of Mormon contains “imitations of Bible events.” Just as one would expect in a book written by a people steeped in portions of the Bible.

4. The Book of Mormon contains “anachronisms [sic]”. Some of these are what might be called translator anachronisms, and these tend to appear in every translation of a complicated ancient text. But Helland has more than this in mind. He is simply wrong, for example, when he argues that the word “church” in the Book of Mormon could not be used to translate a roughly equivalent Hebrew term (p. 99). The Greek word which the KJV renders “church” takes the place of the Hebrew either for “assembly” or for “synagogue.” Clearly, in the Book of Mormon the word rendered “church” identifies the People of God—that being the common name for the assembly—just as one would expect.105

5. The Book of Mormon contains “geographical errors.” What he has in mind is the claim that, since Arabia has no rivers, it makes no sense, from Helland’s perspective, for Lehi to refer to a river. There are reasons for believing that it makes a good deal of sense, but Helland did not bother to consult the literature that would have brought that argument to his attention.106

6. The Book of Mormon contains “paraphrases of the Old and New Testaments.” That hardly seems a problem to me, but is exactly what one would expect, if the book is what it claims to be. This is true, unless, of course, these paraphrases clearly constitute anachronisms. But since the Book of Mormon has some of its early prophets know from special divine revelations—including the visitation of angels—of things that later turn up in the New Testament, it is difficult to charge the Book of Mormon with anachronisms, given its own self-understanding.

7. The Book of Mormon refers to “a priesthood since the beginning of time.” No comment is necessary, since all this complaint amounts to is a sectarian difference with what is taught in the Book of Mormon, and, obviously, there will be


106 On this matter, see Nibley on Arabian “rivers,” in Lehi in the Desert, 45, 79–83; and his An Approach to the Book of Mormon, 256.
many points on which sectarian speculation will conflict with the contents of what God revealed to his ancient prophets.

8. The Book of Mormon mentions "frequent visible intervention of angels." I am at a loss to see how this is an objection, unless one is certain that such things simply have not, should not, or cannot take place. And that may be Helland's stance.

9. The Book of Mormon manifests "doubtful ethics on the part of its faithful prophets." Helland, of course, is in a position to make such a judgment from his presumably higher morality grounded on his own sectarian notions of biblical ethics.

10. The Book of Mormon manifests "excessive display of supernatural power" (cf. p. 101). Joseph Smith reported that he was told by a heavenly messenger that those who take upon themselves the role of professors of religion might end up manifesting "a form of godliness but they deny the power of God."

11. The Book of Mormon manifests "excessive wordiness." My students complain about the wordiness of Plato's dialogues when the problem is their own literacy and their having little familiarity with ancient texts. Perhaps this explains Helland's complaint. In addition, I find Helland's complaint rather irritating. One example, I trust, of his own capacity to avoid wordiness will not be considered mean-spirited on my part. "The first page of the pretest," according to Helland, "explained the purpose of the seminar, requested the names and addresses of the participants and explained the purpose of the seminar" (p. 119). That passage is wordy at least in the sense of being redundant.107

12. The Book of Mormon manifests a "lack of clarity in interpretation of dreams." Reverend Helland just cannot seem to follow Lehi's dream and the subsequent unpacking of its meaning (p. 102).

13. Some "posterior changes in [the] wording [of the Book of Mormon] which may change the meaning" have taken place. This is a favorite with certain anti-Mormon tractarians, especially the Tanners. Why cannot Joseph Smith edit the words

107 Among the numerous mistakes in Helland's thesis are the following: "A brass all [sic] with two needles" (110); and someone named Melek [sic] is said to have led a migration from Jerusalem (p. 76). Oddly, Melek may be related to the name Mulek, though it does not appear that Helland is aware of that speculation.
that he dictated to his scribes when he later discovers that the Saints and others are not understanding it properly or that some mistakes have gotten into the published version? This kind of complaint rests at least in part on odd sectarian notions about prophets and sacred texts and little appreciation for the difficulties of getting something into draft form and then into print.

14. The Book of Mormon is guilty of "appealing to modern racial and religious prejudices." That is, Reverend Helland, in his effort to find something wrong with the Book of Mormon, attributes to it, as I have shown, some odd ideas about the "origin" of what he calls the "races" and then he complains that what he finds in the text is unacceptable to him (cf. p. 95, 171-76).

15. One finds "inaccurate religious history in regards to the Bible and the Roman Catholic Church" in the Book of Mormon (cf. p. 105). This is true if and only if one reads the Book of Mormon from a narrow sectarian perspective and hence for the purpose of finding something about which to complain.

16. Where earlier Helland complained about an "excessive display of supernatural power" and about too "frequent visible intervention of angels" in the Book of Mormon, he now finds in it "the belittling of the power of the Holy Spirit to convince mankind of the truth of the Bible." The reason he holds this view seems to be that he assumes that God simply cannot add a single word to the Bible through special revelations to his prophets that could in any way support the Bible, or correct current misunderstandings, or supplement what is in it, or apply it to our times. All God is permitted to do from his perspective is to warrant the sectarian ideology that Helland attributes to the Bible as that is understood by one faction of Protestants in our own time. In addition, he believes that the Bible was written by God or at least dictated by God, and in some supernatural way protected from blemishes, changes, or misinterpretations on the part of readers, that is, those who happen to agree with an evangelical fundamentalist reading of it.

17. The Book of Mormon contains "the identification of itself as a clear and accurate interpreter of the Bible." This offends Reverend Helland, since preachers (perhaps like Jimmy and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, or Oral Roberts or whoever), if they preach the orthodox religion, from his perspective have the final say on what the Bible really means; they alone have access to the workings of the Holy Spirit, though they are not, of course, prophets, and hence do not actually
speak either to or for God. But they are professionals, they get paid for their preaching, they are trained for the ministry and are not mere layman, like the Latter-day Saint leaders (cf. p. 110).

18. "The identification of Bible-believing churches with the church of the devil" is found in the Book of Mormon. I am sure that the reader will note the question-begging that stands behind this kind of assertion.

19. Prophets in early portions of the Book of Mormon are busy "anticipating the ministry of Jesus and the apostles." One would assume that Reverend Helland does not object when his fellow preachers find the anticipation of the ministry of Jesus in the Old Testament. But he clearly is offended when prophets in the Book of Mormon can look forward with even more clarity and precision to the atonement for sin to be wrought by the Messiah.

20. The Book of Mormon is guilty of "anticipating its own uncritical acceptance by the American Indian." No comment is necessary.

21. And, finally, the Book of Mormon is guilty of "the incorporation of errors of the King James Bible's translators into its own text." The example he provides is the reference in the Book of Mormon to a steel bow, when a parallel reference in the KJV uses the same words, and a better translation could well be bronze bow.108

Why the Hostility to the Book of Mormon?

One explanation for the countercult business is that it offers a way for people to make a living by preying on the gullible. Whatever might be said for such an explanation, it does not explain the bulk of anti-Mormon activities and literature. What then does, if not sincere sectarian sentiments? There seem to be at

108 On this issue, see William J. Hamblin, "The Bow and Arrow in the Book of Mormon," in Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds., Warfare in the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 373–74; and John L. Sorensen, An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985), 286. Sorensen indicates that the use of the word "steel" in Old and New World contexts is a "complex problem. Nibley has discussed how uncertain we remain about what might be meant by 'steel' in ancient Old World texts. The King James translators were unclear on the point; several places where they put 'steel' now would be translated 'bronze.' " But even that may not entirely resolve the issue.
least as many people who are in a frenzy over the possibility that Joseph Smith might have been the prophetic agent through whom God restored the gospel, and that the Book of Mormon is the word of God, as there are people who have occasional doubts about such matters. Of course, those who have misgivings about the Restoration may sometimes invoke nonsense to assuage their doubts, but those who fear that angels visited Joseph Smith, seem very anxious to find ways of making Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon go away. The more reasonable and competent literature on Mormon things has not, at least to this point, been rooted in such narrow sectarian passions and commitments. And secular, naturalistic criticisms of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon have as yet not caught the attention or the imagination of the Saints. If something like this is true, then we might consider whether Helland’s dissertation might have been better if he had consulted a library or had the benefit of competent supervision. My opinion is that it would have helped. But it would have helped only marginally, given his emotional attachment to a sectarian ideology. And yet my feeling is that Reverend Helland is a sincere, devout individual. And my hope is that something might happen that would cause him to give Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon another chance, that is, a real chance, to speak their message to him. After all, there is another way of seeing the Restored Gospel than through the distorted and distorting lens provided by the likes of Loftes Tryk, the Tanners, Reverend John L. Smith, and Ed Decker.