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Title  A Look at Jerald and Sandra Tanner’s Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon

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Abstract  Review of Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon (1990), by Jerald and Sandra Tanner.

A Look at Jerald and Sandra Tanner’s *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*

Reviewed by Tom Nibley

In my ramblings through Hollywood and environs in search of employment I occasionally encounter a gentleman named Robert Pierce (we’re actors who often audition for the same parts) who has made something of an avocation out of studying anti-Mormon literature. As I have taken exception to some of the things he has said, he provided me a copy of *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon* by Jerald and Sandra Tanner. Of the Tanners, he informed me, “They are specifically known for their thoroughness and non-*ad hominem* approach.” And he challenged me to examine their work.

The gauntlet having thus been thrown, I thought, “I might as well pick it up.” So let’s take a look at the Tanners and their thrilling exposé. This is essentially the reply I wrote to Mr. Pierce, slightly rewritten to make it less personal. Robert mentions the Tanners’ thoroughness. Okay, let’s check that out. I make no claim to being a scholar and am not familiar with much of the literature with which the Tanners work, but there are some things they bring up that I do know something about. In their introduction to *Covering Up the Black Hole*, they state, “After Smith’s death, his Egyptian papyri were lost. In 1967, however, they were rediscovered” (p. 3). From the way this is written one would assume that all the papyri were recovered. Of course, this is not the case. Even a child, having the opportunity to view the recovered papyri and then looking at the book of Abraham, would notice that only one of the three facsimiles from the book is in the collection. But then, most people don’t have that opportunity. So what happened here? (“The Tanners and the Egyptian Papyri; Innocent Slip—Or Deliberate Misinformation?—You Make the Call.”) But let’s move on lest we stagnate.

We now read, “Grant S. Heward, a Mormon scholar, presented some astounding claims to us. He maintained that the actual fragment of papyrus which Joseph Smith used to produce the book of Abraham was among the papyri . . . and that it was
in reality an Egyptian funerary text known as the ‘Book of Breathings.’ We carefully checked Mr. Heward’s work and found it to be completely reliable” (p. 3). That certainly sounds thorough and scholarly. But with whom did they check? That they never say. Well then, with whom should they check? How about the scholar to whom the papyri were entrusted?

Shortly after the papyri were turned over to the Church they were given over to the tender mercies of one Hugh Winder Nibley (yes, the one sometimes referred to by me, my brothers, and sisters as “Daddy”), who was requested to work with the papyri and give his analysis. This was not done in secret—it was in all the Utah papers at least—and the result has been two books, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri—An Egyptian Endowment* and *Abraham in Egypt*, plus many shorter articles, numerous speeches, and innumerable family home evening lessons that were (I have on excellent authority) boring to teenage girls.

So why do the thorough Tanners completely ignore his work? (“The Tanners on the Abraham Papyri: Innocent Oversight or Deliberate Misinformation? Chapter 2: The Hugh Nibley Question.”) Could it just possibly be because he says things they don’t like? I’m sure they would be more than happy to quote him extensively if they had the opportunity, right? But what does he say?

In *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, he writes, “The Prophet Joseph himself has supplied us with the most conclusive evidence that the manuscript today identified as the Book of Breathings, J.S. Papyri X and XI, was not in his opinion the source of the Book of Abraham. For he has furnished a clear and specific description of the latter: ‘The record of Abraham and Joseph, found with the mummies, is (1) beautifully written on papyrus, with black, and (2) a small part red, ink or paint, (3) in perfect preservation.’ ”

Further,

Since Joseph Smith actually possessed quite a number of perfectly preserved, beautifully written Egyptian manuscripts adorned with rubrics [the red characters], there is no reason to doubt that he was describing such a document as the source of “the

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record of Abraham and Joseph." And there can be no doubt whatever that the manuscript he was describing was and is an entirely different one from that badly written, poorly preserved little text, entirely devoid of rubrics, which is today identified as the Book of Breathings. One cannot insist too strongly on this point, since it is precisely the endlessly repeated claim that the Book of Breathings has been "identified as the very source of the Book of Abraham" on which the critics of Joseph Smith have rested their whole case, oblivious to the howling absurdity of insisting that the book was produced in a manner in which, as they tirelessly demonstrate, no book could possibly be produced, ever!\(^3\)

The above was written in direct response to the work of Mr. Heward and the Tanners. Is their failure to acknowledge it a result of their not knowing about it? Or is it because they simply cannot refute it?

Moving on. There is a saying that "Checking your sources and their context can ruin your argument. But it can save your credibility." Unfortunately for our sagacious swamis, they seem to have remembered only the first part when they bring up Alma and the six-hundred-years-from-Lehi-till-the-birth-of-Christ prophecy. They say that Alma seems ignorant of that prophecy because he says, "The time cometh, we know not how soon" (Alma 13:25). But if they had taken the time to read verse twenty-four they would have seen that this refers to "the time of his coming in his glory" (Alma 13:24)—a very different time from that of his birth.

In Covering Up the Black Hole, the Tanners advance an argument regarding the time it took to translate, the conclusion being that the small plates would translate more quickly because of "extensive plagiarism" and "lack of details" (p. 43). (The details are so sparse, in fact, that Hugh Nibley has only been able to write two books, Lehi in the Desert and An Approach to the Book of Mormon, plus large portions of two others based on those few crumbs that remain, while many other authors have written from and about these meager leavings, but I'm afraid I haven't been able to read most of them. I'm not on their mailing lists.) The ending date of the translation the Tanners use is B. H.

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\(^3\) Ibid., 3.
Roberts’s nebulous “between the early part of June 1829, and August of the same year” (p. 43). Now if our super sleuths had taken the time to do a little elementary arithmetic they might have been canny enough to see that the translation was moving slower, not faster, at this time. The same conclusion is arrived at by John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone in the first chapter of Reexploring the Book of Mormon, where the time of translation is given a closer look. Now I certainly wouldn’t want to accuse our learned mentors of the slightest taint of anything that might smack of duplicity, so I’ll just call these things little “whoopsies.”

Robert also tells me the Tanners are not *ad hominem* in their approach. Well, just for fun, let’s look at some of the evidence. We could, for example, take note of their habit of calling Mormon scholars “apologists” (Does this word perhaps conjure up images of sniveling cravens desperately scrambling to cover up one heinous indiscretion after another, all the while whining “I’m sorry, I’m sorry”? No, of course not. At least not to scholars familiar with the term. And who cares what the vast unwashed think, right?), while any one who says something that supports their theories is a “scholar” or “expert.” (Does not the mind’s eye perceive calm and lordly savants, graciously deigning to stoop from their ivory towers to impart magisterial wisdom to the eager, muddied masses?) But that’s just kind of sidestream silliness. The essence of the “Black Hole” epic, however, demands a closer look.

In reading *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*, one quickly becomes aware that this is another in the long list of theories put forth to explain how the Book of Mormon was really produced. Incidentally, this is such a common method of attacking the Book of Mormon that, starting on the very page from which the Tanners quote him quoting someone else about what a forgery is, Nibley (the other one) writes,

> The authenticity of an ancient writing can be judged only in terms of what it claims for itself, never what others claim for it. Otherwise one might begin by assuming that the Book of Mormon was written by an Eskimo hunter, a Portuguese fisherman, or a New York farmer, and from there proceed to seek out anything and everything in its pages that might con-

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firm the theory. That won’t do, because literary evidence can always be contrived.”

In the face of this seemingly reasonable statement, the Tanners, undaunted, have forged ahead, basing their entire book on claims they have made for the Book of Mormon. This shows a courage and independence of spirit of the same high caliber as that exhibited by the Donner Party. Its chances of being accepted as the definitive theory are dependent upon the credibility of its authors or the incredibility of alternate theories and their authors. Since the only other story they seem interested in disproving is that of Joseph Smith himself, that’s where they concentrate their efforts.

Disproving Joseph’s claims would seem to be a simple task. After all, he’s asking us to believe in modern revelation, in angels again visiting the Earth, and in the restoration of ancient scriptures, rites, and organization. Nothing could seem easier, except for this strange bunch of wild-eyed heretics like me who ask disturbing questions such as Weren’t the times of revelation always modern to those who lived in them? Didn’t Christ have the same problem with people who would only accept ancient revelation? “Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchers of the righteous, and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets” (Matthew 23:28–31).

If angels existed in biblical times, why not now? Did Gabriel have such little staying power that he simply faded out of existence? Were the heavenly choirs just hired for that one gig with the shepherds and then took off for other dimensions where they could gambol through the galaxies and maybe sing back-up for some really big stars—like Sirius and Antares? Or is there some slight possibility that they’re still around, dwelling with, and awaiting the commands of God to do his will (see Hebrews 12:22 and all over Revelation)?

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And, if the church had a specific organization in the past (Matthew 10:1-6, Ephesians 4:11-14), and practiced certain rites (John 3:5, 1 Corinthians 15:29), shouldn't it have the same organization and rites today? Since those who ask such questions often find the answers in the teachings of Joseph Smith and join the Church God commanded him to organize, and since they can—in the broadest sense of the term—be considered human beings, our gallant pedagogues, the Tanners, have taken it upon themselves to disseminate the highly significant knowledge that this course of action does not meet with their approval.

So they invent a theory—a theory which has the one goal of discrediting Joseph Smith. Let's ignore the fact that whether or not their theory is true, it doesn't come close to explaining the contents that make this the most remarkable book on earth, and take a look at what they've done. They say that Joseph Smith wrote 1 Nephi through the Words of Mormon as a cover-up for the lost 116 pages of manuscript because he couldn't remember the details of what he had written before. One sentence I find intriguing: "Many important things, therefore, which had evaporated from Joseph Smith's memory would also have to vanish into a rayless and indefinable 'black hole' in the Book of Mormon" (p. 13). I can see the headlines: "Researchers Read Mind of Man 148 Years Dead!!" I do believe that the National Enquirer, The Globe, Star Magazine, Hard Copy, and others of that ilk would all be vying for a shot at the story, but it might not live up to their high journalistic standards when they find out that this "new discovery" of the Tanners just happens to agree precisely with what they have been preaching for over thirty years—and that the entire fabric of their argument is held together by an exceedingly tenuous string of nebulous phrases like "perhaps" and "he must have." In other words, guesses—pure and simple. And the only thing they can do to make those guesses look good is try their darndest to make Joseph Smith look bad.

The main tool the Tanners use in their tireless researches is the "discovery of motives." For example, "Joseph Smith must have become tired. . . . He seems to have had exceptional powers of imagination and must have found it very difficult to repress his desire" (p. 19). Why the must haves and the seems?—because there is not a scrap of evidence outside the febrile brains of our dedicated cognoscenti that this is what he did. The only reason Joseph Smith "must" have had these motives is to please the Tanners, since their theory falls apart like a house of cards if
he didn’t. I hope they are duly grateful for his efforts on their behalf. There are numerous other examples scattered throughout the book: “There can be little doubt [can there?] that if Smith had not been hindered by fear . . .” (p. 27). “He knew [and how do our honored exegetes know what he knew? ‘. . . the mind’s eye, Horatio.’] very well that the work was spurious” (p. 73). And, “Smith’s lack of concern regarding accuracy. . .” (p. 38). (This because he did some perfectly normal rewrites, something the Tanners do not allow.) These phrases, accompanied by a few adjectives such as “clever,” “lazy,” “creative,” and of course the all-time favorite, “plagiarist,” sprinkled about the landscape are all calculated to draw a picture of Joseph Smith as a thoroughly unprincipled scoundrel. The Tanners have to make the reader believe that whatever he says, his word cannot be believed. In other words, their theory rests entirely on the ad hominem argument that Joseph Smith is an untrustworthy scamp, no matter what he actually says or does. Everything else in the magnificent tome they have produced is a smoke screen to keep people from really looking at what Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon have to say.

The use of that word plagiarism deserves a closer look. According to Webster plagiarism is “1. the appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one’s original work.” Well, that would let Joseph Smith off the hook, since he never claimed the Book of Mormon as his own work. But, then, what does Webster know? Language is determined by usage, and the Tanners, not unlike Humpty Dumpty, use the language just as they please. Let’s take a “for instance”: “. . . 2 Nephi 15:12. An examination of this verse, however, shows that it was plagiarized from Isaiah 5:12 in the Bible” (p. 56). Sounds very studious, doesn’t it? But what does a complete examination reveal? This verse happens to appear in the midst of a section that starts, “And now I write some of the words of Isaiah, that whoso of my people shall see these words may lift up their hearts and rejoice for all men. Now these are the words, and ye may liken them unto you and unto all men” (2 Nephi 11:8). There follow a number of chapters that certainly do seem to be from Isaiah, and includes the quote the Tanners say is plagiarized. Then we find, “Now I, Nephi, do speak somewhat concerning the words which I have written, which have been spoken by the mouth of Isaiah” (2 Nephi 25:1). Well! I never! Not only to plagiarize the Bible, but to have the unmitigated gall to announce blatantly that
he is doing so! Now that the Tanners have been so kind as to redefine the word for us, I hope their readers will do their Christian Duty and, the next time they hear their minister quote a scripture or use a phrase like "wages of sin," or "charity never faileth," march themselves right up to the pulpit and have that awful man denounced, debunked, defrocked, dismissed, and destroyed for the terrible crime of plagiarism!

At this point I pause for a moment of bemused pondering to try to comprehend how someone could be so caught up in their agenda that they could do such violence to the English language. And apparently do it with a straight face.

Now let's check out some of the other methods our meritorious mentors subscribe to. I made mention of the Tanners' making claims for Joseph Smith and then debunking those claims, mostly by pointing out that there are lots of things that are missing, without ever justifying their apparent assertion that those things are necessary. Let's use an analogy to show how that's done. Perhaps I read somewhere, "Bob says he drove from New York to Los Angeles over a five-day period, bringing his mother with him." "A-hah!" cry I, "A canard! Lies upon lies and deception following deception!" and, using the Tanners' methods, I can prove it. To drive from New York to Los Angeles would obviously require a car, would it not? Well, yes, a truck is a possibility, but nevertheless, an automotive vehicle would be necessary, . . . but there is no mention of any such vehicle in Bob's story! Why this astounding oversight? Especially since Bob purports to come from a society in which automobiles were not only used, but practically venerated. (I'm thinking here of the Tanners' discussion of the Passover in Covering Up the Black Hole: "Since the Nephites were supposed to have been Israelites, . . . they should have celebrated the Passover almost six hundred times after they came to America" [p. 59]. Well, the Book of Mormon says the people kept the law of Moses, which includes the Passover [2 Nephi 5:10, Alma 25:15]. Why draw pictures and diagrams when that has very little to do with the purpose for which the book was written, namely to testify of Christ?) Obviously this "Bob" has something to hide. If he did indeed drive, why is there no mention of gas stations? Does he really believe that we are so naive as to accept the incredible supposition that he drove all that way without once stopping for gas?

And why no mention of cities? Any child can tell you that America is literally polka-dotted with cities from one coast to the
other, but "Bob" seems to be totally unaware of that well-known fact. Bob also doesn't seem to care much about his family either. Oh, yes, he mentions his mother—significantly not giving her a name—but father, brothers, sisters, cousins, in-laws, grandparents, etc., . . . not a word. I could go on and on about the astonishing lack of musical instruments, dishes, and utensils (Bob doesn't eat?!?!), clothes and footwear, medical supplies, toys, earwax, cantaloupes, etc., but by now the message should be clear; Bob is covering something up. (I understand there were a series of bank robberies in Wichita that week. Hmmm.) And not only that, he has the temerity to bring his mother into the picture, making that sainted soul an accomplice to his nefarious scheming. The man apparently has no shame at all!

Notice how what Bob said is never attacked, but only what he didn't say; however, by taking the rhetorical stance of high-minded superiority, and thereby making Bob's story sound ridiculous even though it is perfectly logical and reasonable as first told, Bob can be made to appear a rascal to the uncritical observer. This is done over and over in Covering Up the Black Hole. The "evidence" used to back up these claims is a list of meaningless words that go on ad nauseum. From pages 48 to 64, the book could have been written as a pile of forms, just filling in the blanks:

We noticed a deficiency of any mention of [——— (add words here)]; this astounded us because the Bible used them ___ times while the Book of Mormon only used them ___ times!

And this from people who accuse Joseph Smith of using "filler" by quoting Isaiah and the allegory of the olive trees! Incidentally, since the subject has come up, The Hon. Wesley P. Walters has it wrong (p. 24). If he had checked his botany instead of his Bible he would find the allegory to be a very accurate description of olive culture without figs or grapes coming into the picture as he alleges. And if he had bothered to look into some of the research being done on the Dead Sea Scrolls and other ancient texts he would have found that the comparison of the house of Israel to an olive vineyard was a very popular thing to do. Joseph Smith didn't plagiarize the seventy-seven verses of Jacob 5 from the nine verses in Romans 11 that speak of Israel as olive trees, but both Paul and Jacob were drawing from
an ancient tradition. But that sentence, “The result is a staggering conglomeration that would perplex a horticulturalist and bewilder an exegete” (p. 24) [Translation—“I don’t get it”] is worded to keep the proper rhetorical stance best suited to make Joseph Smith look foolish. (Incidentally, how did Joseph learn about olive culture in upstate New York?)

But back to our form. This form is first used in discussing the relative absence of women in the Book of Mormon. Since they are the proud possessors of a computer and some classy new software (cheerfully introduced to them by the church that they allege is full of spies and suspicion), they are able to tell us such fascinating tidbits as, “The word she, which is found 982 times [oooh!] in the Bible, appears only fifty-six times [ahhh!] [in the Book of Mormon]” (p. 15). Now if you enjoy plowing through mountains of minutiae you may go read this steriling monument to electronically assisted bean counting, but I’m going to quote from it as little as possible. What I find intriguing are the conclusions our learned oracles manage to leap to from these innocuous statistics.

By merely counting the number of words that relate to womanhood, the Tanners deduce that there is an effort here to cover up something that is deliberately missing (How many times do the Baseball Writers of America not mention women? What is it that they are trying to cover up?) and that the paucity of women indicates a sameness of style and therefore seems to show a single author (see p. 15, column 2). What this really shows is that the Tanners apparently can’t spot a difference of style. By their reasoning you could go into the Library of Congress and prove that every book that didn’t mention tap-dancing was exhibiting a sameness of style that showed them all to be the work of a single author. Are there really people on this earth so gullible or so desperate to prove the Mormons wrong that they buy into this foolishness?

Let me spell out the intentions of the Book of Mormon once more. They’re found on the title page and clearly state that it is written “to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever—And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself

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6 Nibley, Since Cumorah, 238–39, 283–85. F.A.R.M.S. will be publishing a volume on the olive and Jacob 5.
unto all nations.” It has been carefully edited by one man, Mormon, who eliminated everything he considered extraneous to accomplishing that mission, and it is upon these criteria that it should be judged.

“Robert Pierce gave the worst performance of ‘Lear’ last night at the Globe that this critic has ever had the misfortune to review,” screams the paper. But last night Robert Pierce was performing “Hamlet” to a highly appreciative audience at the Forum, and the critic was basing his review on the hearsay of Mr. Pierce’s worst enemy. Is Mr. Pierce offended? Not if he recognizes that this is the same method of criticism that is so laudable when used by our revered gurus. Therefore most of what the Tanners use as evidence is simply a huge pile of non sequiturs. Their whole argument, based on what is missing from the book, is entirely beside the point and totally invalid.

But I can’t let this subject go without one other observation: our perspicacious pedagogues point out that, “Our preliminary research convinces us that an entire book could be written on what is missing in the Book of Mormon” (p. 46). What! only one?! Why I could go to the market, get all the tabloids and start clipping and before long I’d have books on Elvis, UFOs, bizarre sex practices, the royal family, dieting, and the private lives of Hollywood stars, just for starters; and not a word of it in the Book of Mormon. One wonders how many neurons had to die before that sentence started to look sensible. The point is that when you start looking for what’s missing, the entire universe of information that is not actually in that volume is available. But the only time missing information is valid in an argument is when that information was actually promised. (“I went to see ‘Hamlet’ last night. It was dismal; no fireworks, no tractor pulls. Not even dancing dolphins or killer whales. And they promised ‘An evening of sophisticated entertainment’!” “But did they perform ‘Hamlet?’” “Oh, well, yes—there was that. But that’s not what I call entertainment.”) And the Tanners keep proving, over and over, that the Book of Mormon isn’t what they call a religious book. And what exactly might that be?

To be a true religious book, according to hints dropped along the way by our canny counselors (they never do give a definition), it must: (1) not be similar to the King James Version of the Bible, (2) contain all the words that are in the KJV, and in the same ratio, although they will be denounced as plagiarism as soon as they’re found, and (3) be so completely original that nothing in them could possibly be attributed to anything mun-
dane. For example, it would be unwise to include a dream, since there is a high probability that you or someone in your family once had a dream, and that it is, therefore, the real source of your inspiration. (4) It must include every piece of mundane, everyday trivia that is in the Bible. Such things as houses, cities, dishes, colors, and music must be there in the same ratio that they appear in the Bible or you will be found "sadly deficient." Prepare again to be called a plagiarist when you meet this requirement. (5) If you bring God or prophets into the story, by all means don't let them know too much. Isaiah may say that God knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:9–10), but in this enlightened, scientific age our erudite educators know better, and anything that smacks of the prophetic will immediately be branded "anachronism" and dismissed. (6) Never introduce anything of a doctrinal nature that does not circumspectly agree with conservative twentieth-century Protestant theology. You may presume to write something for the purpose of changing the world, but that is simply not acceptable behavior in polite company. (7) Use biblical texts that are completely unknown (like Joseph Smith did in Doctrine and Covenants 7 and the first chapter of Moses; I've never seen a word from an anti-Mormon about them), but will be known in, say, a hundred years. This is to make it pleasing to the scholars. Which brings us to (8): Do not, under any circumstances, write for the masses. If you want to please the Tanners, aim for the airy aeries of arcane academia where your production can be pedantically pondered by professorial pedagogues such as, well—the Tanners!!! If, after reading these criteria, you are confused as to how you should proceed, don't worry, the world probably isn't holding its breath in anticipation of your epic.

Time for a look at other methodology. There has arisen in the last few years a study called "stylometry." It uses what the statisticians who employ it call "non-contextual words" such as: a, and, the, that, of, etc., to establish a pattern of authorship and thus eliminate those authors whose style is incompatible with the text. Through this method they have eliminated all nineteenth-century contenders who have been thrown out to the world as possible authors of the Book of Mormon, including Joseph Smith.7 The Tanners, exhibiting their typical meticulous scholar-

7 See "Wordprints and the Book of Mormon" based on research by John L. Hilton in John W. Welch, ed., Reexploring the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1992), 221–26; and Wayne
arship, ignore these and any other papers or studies on the subject (the Larsen and Rencher article lists fifteen other works, most by non-Mormons, in a footnote. And that was published ten years ago) and with an imperious sniff dismiss stylometry as worthless because, “The evidence of plagiarism, in fact, is so extensive that it would be impossible to make an accurate study of so-called “non-contextual words” (p. 27). This was based upon their high degree of comprehension of the science, which they apparently gained by reading one newspaper article that appeared in the Provo Herald in 1979. They have apparently been circumspect in avoiding any other studies on the subject for the wise reason that it blows their theories about plagiarism right out of the water.

But, armed with an impressively powerful nescience of the field, they strap on helmet and buckler and sally forth. Against the charts and graphs, carefully controlled studies, and hundreds of computer runs they launch their argument, to wit: “We feel that our method is much more reasonable.” No silly charts, graphs, or logic for our formidable savants—“We feel” sufficeth. Why? “... in view of the evidence of heavy plagiarism in the text of the Book of Mormon” (p. 27). But their method is “to search for certain combinations of words which seem to be strewn throughout the Book of Mormon,” phrases such as “dwindled in unbelief,” “expeditious that,” and so forth. In other words: “Since the book is full of evidence of plagiarism, according to our definition of the term, our method is to search for evidence of plagiarism as we define it” (see p. 14). Does anybody spot the circular reasoning here?

This method falls apart. First of all the whole thing is beside the point. It is the history and doctrine of the book that deserve to be investigated. An analogy demonstrates: take the sentence, “He really flew a six-week-long purplish red banana.” Right off we see, using the Tanners’ method, that “he really flew” was plagiarized from Sports Illustrated in an article on track and field. Then the phrase “a six-week-long” is quite obviously from a travel brochure, and “purplish red banana” comes out of a book on tropical fruit. So we have “proved” that I am nothing less than a sleazy no-good plagiarist. But all that has

nothing to do with the idea contained in the sentence “He really flew a six-week-long purplish red banana,” which is pure nonsense concocted somewhere in the vast and airy open spaces that occupy my cranial bubble.

If one takes a good look at what the Book of Mormon has to say, the fact that it uses vocabulary similar to that of the Bible (as many other writers both of the nineteenth and other centuries have done) becomes no stumbling block at all to the sincere truth seeker.

Then there is the size of the word groups. If Joseph Smith really did plagiarize words in groups of three or four he would still need to tie those groups together with those pesky little non-contextual words, and his personal stylometry would shine through clear as a bell.

Maybe it’s unclear how the computer analyses of the Tanners and the statisticians differ in detecting authorship. Another analogy is in order: A substitute teacher comes to school and, desiring to diagnose the literary skills of his youthful charges, asks them to write a one-sentence report on a previous field trip. Student A writes: We went to the Smith’s Grocery Store, the Detroit Public Library, and the First National Bank.

Student B writes: We went to a Smith’s Grocery store, Detroit Public Library, and First National Bank.

Student C: We went to the Smith’s Grocery Store, and to the Detroit Public Library, and to the First National Bank.

Student D: We went into a Smith’s Grocery Store, and into a Detroit Public Library, and into a First National Bank.

Now our friend, the teacher, submits these sentences to our experts for analysis. From the stylometrists we get a report that the non-contextual (italicized) words show strong indications of four different authors, although the word blocks are from too small a sample to be entirely accurate. But from the Tanners, with their three-word groups we get the report that all four sentences have “Smith’s Grocery Store,” “Detroit Public Library,” and “First National Bank” in common and therefore were written by a single individual or plagiarized from a common source. In the same way, the Tanners have really shown a common vocabulary and subject—the gospel of Jesus Christ—in the Book of Mormon and the Bible (in other words, exactly what most people would expect from a book subtitled Another Testament of Jesus Christ).

Finally, I have to say something about the absolutely ludicrous idea of anyone writing anything in the manner the Tanners
say Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon. In your trusty copy of Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon, we have one verse of the Book of Mormon, Jacob 4:11, being drawn from seven different books of the Bible (p. 148). All right, just for fun, why don’t we all sit down and undertake a similar feat of larceny.

Now remember, everybody, at least a third of what you write must come from other sources, and you can’t decide what you are going to say until you actually see something that fits sensibly with what goes before. (If Joseph knew what he was going to say before he found it in the Bible, he would simply dictate it, but our transcendent tutors allow for no such shenanigans! “It is clear,” say they, “that the author of the Book of Mormon was holding a King James Version of the Bible in his hand when he produced it” [p. 81].)

There is also a problem if he quoted from memory rather than looking things up. How do we then reconcile an obviously extensive knowledge of the Bible with all those things the Tanners are so eager to point out are missing from the Book of Mormon?—things that he would have striven to include if his purpose was to deceive. How could one man be both so knowledgeable about the Bible, and at the same time so ignorant?

First, to get a feel for the work, let’s take a look at Joseph, hunched over his Bible, frantically turning pages as he tries to find something that will go with “Wherefore, beloved brethren . . .”, which he has just dictated to Oliver Cowdery. Finally his eye alights on 2 Corinthians 5:20, which says, in part, “. . . be ye reconciled to God.” “That works!” he cries to himself, and to Oliver he dictates, “. . . be reconciled unto him . . .,” keeping two of the words in the phrase exactly the same and the other words pretty close. He breezes through the next five words unassisted, but hits a stone wall after “through the atonement of Christ.” What to say? what to say? . . . Suddenly inspiration strikes—he’ll use a synonymous repetition! (Shall we let him cheat a little here? Oh, why not?) Remembering having seen it on a banner at a football game, his mind leaps to John 3:16, and, mumbling to himself to make sure he eliminates the unusable context, he then loudly says, “his Only Begotten Son.” Oliver dutifully writes it down. Now he’s on his own again. “. . . and ye may . . .” Drat! Stuck again! He picks up the Bible and begins to leaf through it. (Problem—does he read carefully, while at the same time holding the string of the narrative in his head so he’ll know what to use when he finds it? Or does he just skim
over the pages jumping here and there until something strikes his eye? Either way, how much sense is this hodgepodge going to make?) Ah, finally! There it is in Luke 20:35, just what he needed: "... to obtain that world and the resurrection." Again, he has to separate it from a context that doesn’t fit at all, but that’s easy enough; you just push a couple of keys on the ol’ IBM, like the Tanners do, right? "... obtain a resurrection, ..." a slight pause and he adds, "... according to ..." Oh rats! According to what? Back to the Bible. According to ... according to ... Too bad he couldn’t use a concordance, but that would mean he already knew what he was going to say, in which case he would be able to dictate it without having to have that open Bible in his hand. How long does it take to get from Luke 20 to Philippians 3?

And what is our friend Oliver doing during these long excursions into duplicity? Practicing cat’s cradle maybe, or whittling decoys in anticipation of duck season? And why did he not, eight years later, as Joseph’s enemy, bring up these egregious discrepancies in Joseph’s story, thereby winning fame, fortune, and the undying gratitude of a nation that was looking for anything and everything it could find to discredit the prophet? It just doesn’t make any sense.

Now, who would like to try the experiment? See how long it takes to write a paragraph in this fashion. And remember that that paragraph is only about an eighth of an average page in a book that is over 500 pages long. And that the man who dictated the translation of the Book of Mormon was only twenty-three years old, had less than one year of formal education, and was in a backwoods region without recourse to research materials, and that the entire time of translation was between three and five months. Joseph’s story is much more credible than the Tanners’—for people who can accept that God still cares enough to talk to men and that angels didn’t die out after New Testament times.

Well, I’ve rambled on more than far enough. There are other points I could address, but why bother? Having waded through the miserable morass of misinformation found in Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon, I have no desire to spend any more time on the Tanners. I find them naive and credulous when it comes to grabbing any straw that they think might break the Church’s back, although they take pains to distance themselves from things like the Spalding manuscript and Mark Hofmann, things that have been completely debunked.
They spend many pages trying to prove that because the Bible has many things in it that are not in the Book of Mormon, the Book of Mormon cannot possibly be what it claims to be and then spend many more pages trying to prove that because there are many things in the Bible that are in the Book of Mormon, the Book of Mormon cannot possibly be what it claims to be; they thereby show that their grasp of the rubrics of logic is tenuous at best. And they remain totally incapable of dealing with evidence contrary to their beliefs, which evidence they cheerfully ignore, misquote, quote out of context, or bury.