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Reviewed by Louis Midgley

**The Shipps Odyssey in Retrospect**

Where, then, do we draw the line between explaining and “explaining away”? . . . It is either a fact, or legend, or lie. You must take it or leave it.

C. S. Lewis, “’Horrid Red Things’”1

Some, impressed by the sheer mass and charge of the Book of Mormon, are now asking why it can’t be seriously and respectfully treated as a myth. Lots of myths are today coming in for the most reverential treatment. But the book disdains such subterfuge, and never tires of reminding us that it is not myth but history and must stand or fall as such. . . . To call this record a myth is to condemn it as effectively as by calling it a fraud.

Hugh Nibley2

By happenstance, Jan Shipps’s *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* was published a few years before the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* was begun. The assessment of the Book of Mormon contained in this book, if it were published now, would warrant comment. The celebratory treat-

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ment this book has already received, and the lofty reputation of its author—the premier non-Mormon expert on Mormon things—justifies retrospective attention to Jan Shipps's book. It therefore seems appropriate, at the tenth anniversary of the publication of *Mormonism*, to examine its author's voyage of discovery as she has striven to fashion a satisfactory explanation of the Book of Mormon and its place in the history, as well as the faith and memory of Latter-day Saints.

I will not examine her crowning achievement—the notion that the Church is not a cult, at least as that term is now used by Evangelical Protestant critics, nor a sect nor a denomination, and that it is neither Catholic nor Protestant, but "a new religious tradition." This is an adaptation of the opinion first broached in 1945 by Fawn M. Brodie, who claimed that Mormonism "was a

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4 Shipps recognizes that explanations of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon cannot be made independent of each other.

5 Shipps's speculation does not apply to the RLDS, who have had considerable Protestant leanings from their beginning in 1860 and who are now moving toward Protestant liberalism.
real religious creation, one intended to be to Christianity as Christianity was to Judaism: that is, a reform and a consummation,” though Shipps insists that “her sustained argument does not follow the lines of Fawn M. Brodie’s work.”

Introducing Shipps

Shipps has been an influential figure among Mormon historians since 1973. She describes herself as an “inside-outsider” to the Latter-day Saint community. She is perhaps the only non-Mormon scholar who has fashioned an entire career out of Mormon studies. In addition, she was both the first woman and the first non-Mormon—with the exception of RLDS luminary Paul M. Edwards—to serve as president of the Mormon History Association.

The first contact Shipps had with Latter-day Saints and the Mormon past came in 1960 when her husband—a librarian—took a position at Utah State University. Earlier she had studied music at two small Southern women’s colleges. In Logan she switched from music to history, while working on a teaching certificate. At that time, according to Shipps, history at Utah State was Mormon and Utah history. Within a year she had her degree and moved with her husband to Colorado. With her interest in Mormon things aroused, at age 36 she earned a doctoral degree in history at the University of Colorado. The novel explanation of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon contained in the initial chapter of her dissertation, later modified and refined, got the attention of RLDS and Latter-day Saint historians. She eventually parlayed

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8 She served in that role in 1979–80.
her degree into a position teaching religious studies and history at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. She is currently the key gentile “expert” on Mormon issues for the media.

Recognizing the Crucial Truth Claims

Shipps stresses the crucial role of the Book of Mormon in constituting the faith of the fledgling Church of Christ. The publication of the Book of Mormon set in place “Mormonism’s foundational claims” (p. xii), which are linked to “the claims made in the book” (p. xiii; cf. p. 174 n. 5). Joseph Smith claimed “that the plates were actually a book whose text contained the fulness of the gospel that would lead to salvation” (p. 13). Thus, “non-Mormons become Mormons when they respond to Mormonism’s fundamental truth claims by taking the Book of Mormon at face value.” But these truth claims are also potentially divisive, and “the truth claims at the very heart of the Book of Mormon guaranteed,” according to Shipps,

that this potential would be realized as soon as this “very strange book,” as Parley P. Pratt called it, thrust itself into culture. Humanity ever since has been divided, so to speak, into opposing camps, one peopled by individuals who treat the book as just a book and nothing more. Set over against this population is a camp in which the network of truth claims in the work is treated as a valid description of what once was and what will be. (p. 27)

Shipps thus seems to agree that on one side of what Dale L. Morgan called the Great Divide are unbelievers who approach the Book of Mormon with naturalistic explanations, and on the other side are those willing to entertain the possibility that angels may bring books. Thus, from Morgan’s perspective, “Joseph either was all he said he was, a prophet of the living God translat-


ing from plates of gold, or a conscious fraud and imposter.” He and others are clearly on the other side of this Great Divide. Accounts of both Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon differ decisively depending on where they stand on what Shipps describes as the “truth claims at the very heart of the Book of Mormon” (p. 27; cf. p. 35).

When confronted by the Book of Mormon, the critical issue about which readers of the book have to make up their minds is that of authenticity. But Shipps steadfastly insists that, as both Methodist and historian, she has never been tempted to accept the book’s truth claims. Instead, she strives to understand the impact of the Book of Mormon on the faithful.

Without accepting the work at face value, it is nevertheless possible to regard the Book of Mormon as the product of an extraordinary and profound act of religious imagination. It lent legitimacy to Joseph Smith’s career and, by tying America to Israel, gave credence to the claim that in these latter days America is the Promised Land and the Mormons are the Chosen People.

But the question still remains: Is it possible or even desirable for an historian dealing with the Book of Mormon to avoid addressing its truth claims? Is it possible to avoid having a latent opinion manifest itself at crucial points in an account? Put another way, are the accounts of the Book of Mormon provided by Shipps really as neutral as she thinks they are?

A Novel Naturalistic Account?

Shipps has striven to fashion a more sympathetic account of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon than previous gentile authors. If we give the label “naturalistic”—the standard description—to explanations that rest on assumptions that deny the pos-

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13 Ibid., 96.
sibility that Joseph Smith was "a prophet of the living God," to use Morgan's language, and "nonnaturalistic" to those explanations that picture Joseph Smith as a genuine prophet, on which side of the Great Divide does her explanation fall? In 1974 and in 1992, Shipps set out what she calls a "naturalistic explanation" of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. It is instructive to examine the details of Shipps's mature explanation of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

In 1945, as is well-known, Fawn M. Brodie pictured Joseph Smith as a charlatan deeply into "magic" and other fraudulent activities as he began to produce the Book of Mormon—which she brushed aside as frontier fiction. According to her theory, Joseph only later introduced into his narrative religious trappings borrowed from Ethan Smith, other elements of his sectarian environment, and so forth.

Shipps began her own "naturalistic explanation" by distancing her views from those of Brodie. "It is . . . 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," as Brodie claimed. Shipps responds to details in Brodie's "naturalistic explanation," which she claims "required a greater leap of faith" than accepting the "naturalistic explanation" she wished to set in place.

The essential details of Shipps's explanation are as follows:

1. that Joseph grew up in a family fascinated with religion;
2. that . . . he thoroughly searched the scriptures;
3. that . . . he probably did have a vision or go through some other non-rational experience;
4. that in the throes of revivalistic excitement he . . . inquired about the matter a second time, thereby stimulating a second vision around 1824;
5. that . . .

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17 Ibid., 10, for Shipps's account of Brodie's stance.
18 Ibid., 11.
19 Ibid.
in connection with his money-digging activities, he actually found some Indian artifacts, or hoped so much to do so, that . . . inspired the writing of the Book of Mormon. Which, leaving aside the question of whether the book has captured eternal truths, plainly reflects the religious experiences and concerns that had been an important part of [Joseph Smith’s] life until that time.  

This explanation, whatever else one might say about it, is clearly naturalistic—and Shipps labels it as such.

Morgan was confident that some naturalistic account of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon would eventually turn out to be wholly satisfactory, that is, “unless, of course, after we are dead and buried,” as he mused in a letter written to Bernard DeVoto on January 2, 1946, “it turns out that Joseph was, after all, a prophet of the living God who established the consummating dispensation and was thus the most important thing to happen since Christ.”  

Though Shipps has also toyed with naturalistic accounts of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic charisms, she is not confident that any such account can settle the crucial issues. She holds that “whether Joseph Smith was prophet or fraud has been debated ever since news of his ‘gold bible’ spread across the New York countryside in the late 1820s” (p. 38). Shipps realizes that her interpretation “of the nature of the creative process that brought Mormonism into being will not ultimately—or even intermediately—settle that disputed issue” (p. 38).

It appears that if one begins with naturalistic assumptions, then one might come to believe that a satisfactory negative explanation will eventually be forthcoming. Naturalistic accounts of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon rule out the possibility that the book is simply true. However, those who do not share secular assumptions will remain skeptical of such explanations. And the believer or potential believer will be skeptical of assumptions that do not at least allow for the possibility of a nonnaturalistic account of the Book of Mormon.

20 Ibid.
21 Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism, 111.
Moving Beyond Truth Claims

Despite having advanced a "naturalistic explanation" of the Book of Mormon that rules out its truth claims, Shipps also claims that her efforts are not intended to confront that issue—they presumably "leave aside" or "bracket out" such questions.

I have, of course, no objection to historians limiting their inquiries to whatever interests them, or to whatever issues they feel competent to address. They may choose to table certain difficult and even crucial questions. And clearly most of the time most historians writing about the Mormon past do not address (directly or in detail) the generative or founding events, including the Book of Mormon, and hence they do not have to argue directly whether Joseph Smith was or was not a genuine prophet. For those whose disposition and training does not equip them to deal with such issues, it might be considered a sign of humility for them to avoid opining about the truth of the Book of Mormon. Furthermore, it may be wise for historians, for political reasons and in an effort to observe the informal norms of comity that govern professional life, to forgo directly expressing their opinions on such issues. We must ask whether this is what Shipps has been doing.

For various reasons some historians may feel impelled to explain how they feel about the truth of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's prophetic truth claims, even though these issues are not the direct focus of their inquiries. They may wish to signal to their more perceptive and curious readers where they personally stand on the crucial questions. This is often done in personal or bibliographical essays, introductions, or notes. Jan Shipps, it turns out, is clearly one of these.22

Lawrence Foster, perhaps the second ranking gentile expert on Mormon things, provides another example. In his study of marriage among the Latter-day Saints, he describes his controlling assumptions, offering an outline of his own "comprehensive naturalistic explanation of the Book of Mormon—an explanation that could," he claims, "go beyond the conventional Mormon view that it is a literal history translated by Joseph Smith or the conven-

22 See, for example, Shipps, "An Inside-Outsider in Zion," 143, where she indicates that she has never been tempted to take the Book of Mormon at face value.
tional anti-Mormon view that it is a conscious fraud.” What Foster proposes is that the Book of Mormon can “probably best be understood, at least in part, as a trance-related production,” whatever that might be. Be that as it may, the Book of Mormon is not, he opines, “history in any sense.” Instead, it is “an unusually sophisticated product of unconscious and little-known mental processes.” To see the book as a “trance-related production" would, according to Foster, allow historians to shift from the unrewarding and ultimately irrelevant question of whether any golden plates with inscriptions ever existed or whether the Book of Mormon was a literal history to the far more important and fascinating question of the content and meaning of this most extraordinary religious document.

23 Lawrence Foster, Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 294 n. 15.
24 Ibid., 296.
25 Ibid., 297.
26 Ibid. Though Foster once rejected “psychological reductionist approaches” to Joseph Smith (ibid., 292 n. 7), he recently provided just such an explanation of Ann Lee, John Humphrey Noyes, Martin Luther, George Fox, Sabbatai Sevi, Emmanuel Swedenborg, Joseph Smith, and Jesus of Nazareth. They all presumably suffered from manic depression—they were bipolar, and that somehow explains their “genius.” See Foster, “The Psychology of Religious Genius: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Religious Movements,” Dialogue 26/4 (Winter 1993): 1–22. Foster borrows his explanation from R. Jess Groesheek, a Jungian psychotherapist, who has offered a number of bizarre explanations of Joseph Smith grounded in the categories of abnormal psychology. Ibid., 9. For Foster’s remarkable diagnosis of Jesus, see ibid., 20. Foster is also back explaining the Book of Mormon as the product of trances. He also lines up behind Anthony A. Hutchinson’s stance in New Approaches to the Book of Mormon, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 1–19. Foster believes that for Latter-day Saints to cease taking the Book of Mormon at face value and start reading it as Joseph’s frontier fiction, provides a middle ground somewhere between anti-Mormon critics who see it as fraud and the credulity of those who accept it at face value. But it does not make organizational sense to move in that direction. Earlier he insisted that believers must reach an accommodation with revisionist historians who have been willing to “reach out and meet them halfway.” Foster, “A Radical Misstatement,” Dialogue 22/2 (Summer 1989): 5–6.
There is, of course, a justification for such signaling of where an author stands on the crucial issues. Thoughtful readers, whether Latter-day Saint or otherwise, will want to know the controlling biases that guide and tend to color or control an author’s work. And it is now widely recognized that there is simply no such thing as detachment, neutrality, or objectivity in the writing of history. Those who write about the past are never somehow above the storms that swirl around them. Such writing is always an effort to challenge or defend some view of the world and in that sense all history is both apologetic and political.

However, I am not arguing that just any account of the past is as good as any other, nor am I saying that there was no past or that we have no texts upon which we must strive to ground the stories we tell and with which we can test our accounts. I am not, as has been alleged, a radical relativist or nihilist. Instead, I have argued that secular categories and naturalistic explanations, whatever else might be said about them, are not somehow privileged merely because they explain away prophetic truth claims, nor do I believe that they necessarily manage to uncover what really happened in the past, while the story told by believers is merely the expression of feelings and in that sense only subjective. In addition, secular, naturalistic explanations of prophetic truth claims, whatever else might be said about them, end up logically foreclosing the possibility that the Book of Mormon is what it claims to be and hence they beg the crucial questions.


29 The Book of Mormon, of course, cannot be proven or not proven to be an authentic ancient history or the word of God. But it still can be tested by the methods of historians. The results will likely only reach some measure of plausibility. That is not because the Book of Mormon has “religious” content or that an angel is believed to have made it available but because plausibility is about as good as can be expected in nontrivial historical inquiries. And a final proof is not necessary for faith to flourish.
Shipps, it must be granted, has wisely focused most of her attention on the function of the Book of Mormon in the lives of the faithful and not on whether it is what it claims to be. It is here that she makes a contribution. In describing the implications of accepting the Book of Mormon at face value, Shipps is at her best. In a kind of summary of her findings, she claims that “Smith’s story is best understood in the context of his sequential assumption of positions/roles that allowed the Saints to recover a usable past” (p. 38); her speculation seems intended to suggest a way of “shifting the focus,” presumably away from crucial truth claims of the Book of Mormon to other less controversial issues, in which a secular historian might make a contribution without becoming embroiled in controversy with the Saints.

Shipps wisely realizes that the primary fact about Latter-day Saints—what makes them such—is their belief that, among other things, the Book of Mormon is simply true. But instead of asking whether the Book of Mormon is true, Shipps calls attention to the fact that believing that it is true—both an authentic ancient history and the word of God—leads the believer back into the world of the Old and New Testaments, where prophets spoke for God, and forward into the eternities to an ultimate forgiveness of sins for those who have faith and then endure to the end, and also to resurrection and eternal life or the fulness of life in the presence of God. By thus calling attention to the role of the Book of Mormon in the life of the faithful, Shipps may have assisted skeptical Gentiles to better understand Latter-day Saints. For this she is to be congratulated.

Instead of asking if the Book of Mormon could be true, Shipps looks at what she calls the “experiential process [which] legitimated the prophet’s centrality to the enterprise, which means that,” she then claims,

as far as history is concerned, the question of whether Smith was prophet or fraud is not particularly important. Of far more significance for the purposes of this study is the fact that when Mormon history is examined within a framework that recognizes a process of replication of the biblical story, it becomes clear that the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith’s prophetic leadership, and the experience of the Saints were all crucial com-
ponents in the creation of Mormonism. (p. 39, emphasis in the original)

But unlike Foster, Shipps correctly senses that the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's story work together, by “reopening the canon and bringing God back into the history of the Saints in such a substantial way that within Mormonism, divinity is still as real as all the other realities of everyday existence” (p. 39). Why then sidestep the question of the truth of the Book of Mormon? Is it that one must adopt the stance of secularized historians who insist on explaining away prophetic truth claims? Is it true that “as far as history is concerned” questions other than whether Joseph was or was not a prophet\(^{30}\) are “of far more significance”? Perhaps other questions are more rewarding or significant for secularized historians for whom all Latter-day Saint talk of the Divine is ultimately considered a mere manifestation of sincere but naive illusion or delusion. Such a one turns out to be like a music critic who cannot distinguish tones, or a painter who is blind to colors.

**Enter “Magic” and the “Occult”**

Thus, instead of confronting the crucial truth claims of the Book of Mormon, Shipps clearly prefers to speculate about “the state of religion and culture wherein the Book of Mormon had to make its way,” while considering “the various responses that were generated by the claims made in the book,” and so forth. She hopes to demonstrate “that a belief that the book is a true record implied much more than acceptance of the historicity of the document itself” (p. xiii).

As she did in her dissertation, only now in a more polished form, Shipps distinguishes the story told by Latter-day Saints of the Restoration from the stories told by anti-Mormons, which tend to describe Smith’s visions and his explanation of the Book of Mormon’s sources as the products of a diseased imagination, if not the elements of a gigantic

\(^{30}\) Or, as Shipps constantly has it, whether he was prophet or fraud, which is not the same thing, since he might not have been a prophet and yet not a conscious fraud, but only involved in an illusion or delusion.
fraud. Consequently Mormonism was pictured in such accounts as a mixture of superstition and subterfuge that conceals the light of truth. (p. 3)

Her strategy in *Mormonism* is to link religion in the nineteenth century with necromancy (p. 6) in order to make a case that the Smith family was deeply involved in magic and the occult arts (see pp. 7–8), which presumably in the 1830s would not have been seen as inconsistent with folk religion. In this way Joseph Smith can be made to appear sincere in his illusions. I have already shown that speculating about such matters was an essential element of her earlier naturalistic explanation of Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims.

Shipps seems fascinated by the possible early involvement of Joseph Smith in magic and the occult. Her account of what she considers their obvious links with Joseph Smith’s visions and revelations is expressed in her book in statements such as the following: “Yet it stands to reason that Smith, too, might sometimes have wondered about the nature of the connection between magical practice and manifestations of divinity despite his convictions about the reality of his visions and the assurances his father gave him that they were ‘of God’ ” (p. 18).

The fascination with speculation and rumors about the Smith family’s involvement with magic and the occult arts has been a prominent feature of Shipps’s work on Mormon history since her dissertation in 1965. At one point she insisted that the Church would have to recast the story of the Restoration by taking into account the contents of a document that was later shown to be a forgery cooked up by Mark Hofmann. More recently she has promoted an awful book by John L. Brooke published under the title *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844,*31 which forces upon Joseph Smith and the Saints bizarre notions presumably drawn from his environment.32 As far

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back as 1988, Shipps was actually advertising Brooke’s book under the title *Joseph Smith, Early American Occult Traditions and the Origins of Mormonism*. Perhaps Shipps really does see the origins of Mormonism in magic and occult traditions and hence welcomes anything that can be used to support her “naturalistic explanation” of the Restoration. One thing is for certain: Brooke’s book does not provide, for those at all familiar with Mormon things, anything approaching plausibility. Why was Shipps unable to see its flaws? Shipps has much explaining to do over her involvement with the execrable Brooke book.

**And Yet . . .**

And yet Shipps is good at explaining the links in the minds of the faithful between the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s role as God’s prophet. “Persons who accepted the volume’s contents as reliable descriptions of past events also accepted at face value Joseph Smith’s account of how it came into being” (p. 29). “It stands to reason, then,” Shipps opines, “that the Book of Mormon and the subsequent events of Smith’s extraordinary career functioned together to establish the authenticity of the book and to cement the link between a Hebrew-Christian understanding of the story of the world and the personal lives of the prophet and the people who became his followers” (p. 37, emphasis in the original). “Non-Mormons become Mormons when they respond to Mormonism’s fundamental truth claims by taking the Book of Mormon at face value.”

Might we not also conclude that Mormons become non-Mormons when they fail to take the Book of Mormon at face

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value—for example, when they start conjuring alternative explanations of its origin and meaning? Shipps senses that the Saints are “very much aware that if enough of their brethren come to accept as true an alternate version of Mormon history then schism is the consequence.” What this opinion suggests is that it is not obnoxious anti-Mormon propaganda that threatens the Saints, but strife and dissent from within, especially over foundational issues.

Shipps is even helpful in identifying from where this kind of thing is likely to come in its more secularized manifestations. “There are,” she claims, without explaining how she came up with the number, “perhaps 25,000 . . . so-called ‘cultural’ Mormons, i.e., individuals who are Latter-day Saints solely from the standpoint of family heritage, not from active membership in any LDS ecclesiastical unit.” A few of these cultural Mormons now report a kind of conversion in which an alternative version of the Mormon past and a revisionist understanding of the Book of Mormon is opened up.

A few of these cultural Mormon dissidents have recently been disciplined by the Church. How would or should Shipps evaluate the actions taken against recent heretics and dissidents? Earlier she sensed that what she labels as “heresy trials” operate among other things “to establish and maintain boundaries of acceptable belief and behavior within religious communities.” She is right. And one can sympathize with those disciplined for flagrant heresy or dissident activity, without denying the need and justification for such discipline. Shipps once annoyed one of her audiences, the radical feminist faction, by making just such a point.

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40 Ibid.
Sacred History—"Truer than True"?

Though Shipps grants that the Book of Mormon has the appearance of "historical accounts of past events, a form integral to everyday experience" (p. 28), this is only an appearance, because, unlike accounts of what really happened in the past,

it has never lent itself to the same process of verification that historians use to verify ordinary accounts of what happened in the past. The historicity of the Book of Mormon has been asserted [for example, by Hugh Nibley] through demonstrations that ancient concepts, practices, doctrines, and rituals are present in the work; that the nineteenth century's overwhelming concern with liberty and the working of the political process is absent from it [by Richard L. Bushman]; that from the standpoint of archaeology, its account of settlement and peoples "makes sense" and could have happened [by John L. Sorenson]; that the pre-Columbian compilers of the various books within the work had distinct literary styles [various word-print studies], and so on. But such demonstrations point, finally, only to plausibility. Proof is a different matter. (p. 28)

She also distinguishes what she calls "sacred history" from "ordinary history." While I am not opposed in principle to such a distinction, I worry about what she tries to do with it. She insists "that there are two separate and distinct kinds of history of any religious tradition—and that Mormonism is no exception. It has a sacred history and it has an ordinary history, . . . and these are very different things." But are they different? She does not argue the issue but merely opines. She states a corollary: "history as a scholarly discipline treats humanity's perception of divinity's dealings with it while history as a sacred story treats God's dealings with mankind more directly." "Sacred history" is seen as taking on "a mythic character which makes it 'truer than true,' if

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42 Shipps, "The Mormon Past," 57, emphasis in the original.
43 Shipps, "An 'Inside- Outsider' in Zion," 154, emphasis in the original.
by truth one means that which is established and verified according to the canons of historical scholarship.”44 Here is where she goes wrong. She has driven a wedge between “what really happened”—her “ordinary history”—and the story (myth if you will) forming and grounding the identity of the Saints.

But for the Saints what Shipps calls “sacred history” is ordinary history that has taken on mythic dimensions and thereby constitutes their story, their relationship to God, the explanation of their trials, the ground for their hopes, and so on. For Shipps, “ordinary history” is presumably about “what really happened,” while “Mormonism’s sacred history, like all sacred history, is a part of the mythological dimension of this religion. By its very nature it can only be retold and defended, not reinvestigated; re-searched.”45 On this she is at least partially wrong.

For Shipps, the contents of the Book of Mormon become “sacred,” and thereby “it becomes something other than a book” for those who accept its historicity (p. 29)—it functions in a mythic dimension. Suppose Shipps is right: Can myth—the story—not be real? Why not? Efforts to examine it, she claims, in the case of the Book of Mormon, lead “only to plausibility,” but not to the proof that is what historians seek while doing “ordinary history.” This opinion—so confidently though casually set forth—may best be understood as her own confessional and professional boundary maintenance mechanism. It is certainly not, as I will show, a mature reflection on either the Book of Mormon or on historical methodology.

Though Shipps recognizes that the Book of Mormon appears to be history, her secular orientation—she now identifies it with “religious studies”—demands that she turn it into mere mythology. Hence, when the faithful accept it as history, they are mistaken in assuming that it is about a genuine past. If, as she claims, the Book of Mormon, because it contains sacred things, becomes something more than history, what exactly does it become? Certainly not a bird or a plane—it becomes their canon, a sacred book or scripture, a book containing the word of God, and thus takes on a mythic dimension in the life of the community of

45 Ibid., emphasis in the original.
believers. Is Shipps arguing, I wonder, that such a book simply cannot be true but only "truer than true," whatever that means, in perhaps the way mythologies that make no claim to being about reality might be thought to be true?

Certainly by containing matters sacred to the faithful, the Book of Mormon does not somehow cease to be a text whose historical claims can be tested in exactly the same way as any other text that appears to be or is thought to be ancient. Shipps grants as much: "nothing distinguishes it from all other books except its claim to be a record of God's dealing with His people in the Western Hemisphere" (p. 29). But she sees in this claim an ingredient that transforms the Book of Mormon into "something more than mere propositions; they become true. But how? In what manner was this book, whose origin was explained in supernatural terms, transmuted into a record of actual events involving real people?" (p. 29, emphasis added). She should be asking in what way a history of real events and peoples takes on a mythic dimension, becomes a founding story, assumes the role of sacred history. The answer: by having the Divine present in the story, and then through faith. That is exactly what transforms ordinary historia into sacred mythos. Of course, not all myths are genuinely historical nor involve real peoples or events. How can we tell? Is the Book of Mormon about reality? Though we will very likely never have anything approaching a final proof, we can and do have what Shipps calls plausibility. And the Saints can have something approaching a prophetic charisma, without which there is only plausibility.

Clearly Shipps confuses how we happen to have gotten the Book of Mormon with the question of whether it is an authentic history. Merely labeling the method by which Joseph Smith claimed to have gotten the record as "supernatural" does not thereby automatically preclude the possibility that it can either be tested or turn out to be true, unless one begins with the dogmatic presupposition that "you don't get books from angels and translate them by miracles."46

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For Shipps, those who accept the historicity of the Book of Mormon are described in the past tense. This tactic allows her to explain that in the age in which this book and the story of its coming forth were originally circulated, "the Bible was still culturally defined as an undoubtedly authentic record of actual events involving real people" (p. 29), that is, it had not been entirely reduced to a mere myth without historical reality by skeptical scholars. Hence it was easy for those rustics who were heavily involved in a cultural context in which the Bible and also "magic" and the "occult" worked together to believe the story of the angel and the book. And she also appropriates the notion that one of the purposes of the Book of Mormon was to counter skepticism by bolstering the Bible, since there was then, just as now, much skepticism about divine things in the age in which the Book of Mormon came forth. But the Book of Mormon is as much an object of skepticism as is the Bible.

But people, lots of them it seems, believe that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient history and also the word of God. How does Shipps explain this fact? Do they simply make a mistake and confuse myth and legend or frontier fiction with real history? Do they need to be enlightened on such matters by contemporary experts in secular religious studies? Presumably, for reasons she does not explain, those who receive the Book of Mormon turn out to want it to be true, and some of them even work to show that it is an authentic ancient record, but they only come up with plausibility, since they are dealing with "sacred history," and therefore not with proof, which is presumably what she thinks real historians arrive at in doing ordinary history with the current canons of the history profession. But again, on this issue she is simply wrong.

Plausibility is about as good as it gets for anything other than the most trivial questions that historians take up. From my perspective, Shipps seems innocent or naive about historical method. It seems that she assumes that objectivity is possible, that facts are what historians work with, and that they generate proofs.

Historians in thrall to one or another variety of positivism might talk that way. "Thus, the story of Mormon beginnings," according to Shipps, "appears to be an exception to the normal modern expectation that natural explanation based on objective
evidence will be more persuasive than supernatural explanation growing from subjective accounts” (pp. 44–45). She concludes:

Like the gospels that include the story of the resurrection of Jesus without supporting it with objective evidence obtained from persons outside the incipient Christian community, the Mormon story includes an account of the translation of the Book of Mormon supported only by the testimony of members of the incipient LDS community. (p. 45)

Presumably, one can describe the evidence for the resurrection as “objective” if and only if the texts reporting eyewitness experience with the resurrected Jesus come from people who did not believe that he was resurrected. Does the mere fact that one believed that Jesus was in fact resurrected somehow preclude one’s report of actually seeing him alive after his crucifixion from being counted as “objective evidence”?

Shipps reports that so-called “supernatural explanations,” that is, what amount to accounts from eyewitnesses of events in which the Divine was manifested in one way or another, have proved persuasive to people who have become Latter-day Saints, “notwithstanding the commonsense arguments that, in an open and public manner, have repeatedly called into question the supernatural explanation that undergirds the Mormon story” (p. 45).

Naturalistic explanations of Mormon beginnings turn out to have no more objectivity than do the arguments presented by the Saints in support of their story. The differences are in the explanation, which in one case includes the Divine, and in the other case excludes the Divine—not in one side offering objective demonstrations and the other side appealing merely to subjective feelings. Is there some reason, other than a predisposition to distrust stories that include encounters with the Divine, to exclude, on principle, the possibility that Joseph Smith was God’s prophet and the Book of Mormon an authentic ancient history? If there is, Shipps has not identified it.

Though Shipps adamantly insists that she is not in the least interested in Book of Mormon truth claims, her very unwillingness to even report on the current state of the debate over its historical
authenticity, and in that sense genuinely leave the issue open, betrays a bias against its truth claims. This is unfortunate, because she has some interesting and perhaps even important things to say about the links between Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon in the faith of Latter-day Saints.

The Odyssey—Getting Launched

In 1965, in the introductory portion of her dissertation, Shipps noted that “Smith said that the Book of Mormon was a translation of records which had been engraved on a set of golden plates given him by an angel in the fall of 1827.”47 This and subsequent observations were preceded by an account of Joseph Smith’s initial interviews with heavenly messengers. Having thus rather prosaically introduced the Book of Mormon, she added that

This strange volume claimed to be the history of the Western Hemisphere between 600 B.C. and 400 A.D., but its account of that millennium was interspersed with such an astonishing variety of philosophical notions and theological speculations that it was immediately apparent that here was no ordinary history. The work recounted stories of voyages and battles and tales of intrigue and treason, and yet the most striking passages in the Book of Mormon were those which were essentially explications of what had also been a part of the visions of Joseph Smith’s youth.48

And what might these explications be? Shipps claimed that Joseph Smith had placed in the Book of Mormon “allusions to the ideas which, according to Smith’s own account, were conceived in the course of his extraordinary experiences.”49 According to Shipps, these allusions

were particularly clear in the second section of the book. This section, the Book of 2 Nephi, included a series of chapters which provided a detailed description

48 Ibid., 20.
49 Ibid.
of the state of society which would exist at the day when the plates of gold would be opened to the man chosen by God. These supposedly prophetic predictions returned again and again to the themes of the visions: that churches already current were corrupt.\(^{50}\)

Shipps described the Book of Mormon as a “fanciful history of the Western Hemisphere,” and as such “its initial appeal was not entirely religious.”\(^{51}\) What then might have been its initial appeal? Shipps thought that the Book of Mormon appealed to the faithful because it provided them with a sort of instant heritage, part of which included the notion that the American Indians were remnants of the twelve tribes of Israel, and that Christ had appeared on this continent in 34 A.D. Thus this book provided a connecting link between the history of the United States and the Judao-Christian tradition which by-passed the European culture filter altogether.\(^{52}\)

One must, of course, look behind the rather common and by now worn-out bromide about the Book of Mormon being an effort to link any pre-Columbian peoples with the lost tribes of Israel. If that is done, then one can see the faint outlines of one of the intriguing elements in Shipps’s later work. Hence, in a much more polished and elegant form, something like this opinion can be found in her *Mormonism*, where the Book of Mormon is seen as providing Latter-day Saints with a distinctive past—a story, or mythology, a sacred history—that forms the identity of the Saints by linking them to ancient Israel and the faithful at the time of Jesus of Nazareth. This seems to be the germ that eventually matured into one of her more significant contributions to the understanding of the faith of the Saints.

The initial explanation provided by Shipps for the Book of Mormon was also her explanation for Joseph Smith. “In the eyes of the Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith’s early visions and his later

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\(^{50}\) Ibid.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.
revelations are both seen as dialogues between man and God.” 53 But can such a conversation take place? Not really! Why? She merely provided an alternative account: “Whether it is regarded as a metaphysical event or a psychic phenomenon, a religiously oriented vision is an intensely realistic subjective experience which leaves the individual who has experienced it with a definite sense of having been in direct communion with God.” 54 What Shipps seems to be saying is that Joseph Smith really believed the story he told, though she sees it as merely a “subjective experience.”

For Shipps, Joseph Smith was a mystic, which presumably explains both his visions and revelations. “Like comparable mystical manifestations—the hearing of transcendental voices, spiritual illumination, infused meditation—visions are spontaneous occurrences apparently independent of the conscious human mind.” 55 On the other hand, “revelation ... is a more prosaic, but far more dependable method of communicating with God.” 56 It involves, according to Shipps, “asking for divine instructions and receiving an ‘impression’ of the will of the Lord in return.” 57 Shipps thus describes Joseph Smith’s visions and revelations as typical instances of merely “subjective religious experience.” 58

Shipps grants that “making any objective differentiation in varieties of religious experience is extremely difficult.” 59 She notes that “some scholars explain the origins of Mormonism entirely in terms of abnormal psychology and treat the visions and the revelations and the Book of Mormon all as products of Joseph Smith’s ‘diseased’ mind.” 60 Or they offer accounts of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon that see both as instances of fraud (citing three examples). Brodie had, according to Shipps, “decided that the Mormon prophet was a likable ne’er-do-well whose Book of Mormon was a gigantic hoax which he, himself, came in time to believe.” 61 By recounting various secular expla-
nations of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, she has set the stage for her more charitable account. Her explanation is as follows:

Official church literature proclaims Joseph Smith as translator, prophet, and martyr—and is forced thereupon into endless justification of the many events in his extraordinary life which fail to fit the pattern. Even so, the religious movement which he started is probably more understandable in these terms than it will ever be in terms of unmitigated villainy or mental derangement. For if Joseph Smith were a knave, then those who joined him were dupes; if he were a madman, those who joined him were fools—and in either case, all subsequent Mormon history must be explained in reference to Smith's personal magnetism. 62

In 1965 Shipps seems to have recognized that there are two general types of explanations of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, for "Mormonism has had," according to her, a kind of "historiographical schizophrenia." 63 She then attempts to find a middle ground between the two large, competing alternatives which fall on either side of Morgan's Great Divide. The answer to the historiographical puzzle is to be found, she claims, in "studies in the nature of religious experience and research in the field of comparative religion during the last three-quarters of a century" which "have made it possible for scholars to provide a more precise and perceptive explanation of the place of faith in history." 64

These studies, Shipps claims, show clearly that Joseph Smith was what she described as "a kind of native American mystic." 65 Joseph Smith a mystic? In 1954 Hugh Nibley had shown, using one of the two sources cited by Shipps, that Joseph Smith was not a mystic. 66 Shipps garners the idea that Joseph Smith was a mystic (and the corollary that the Book of Mormon was a mystical text)

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 30.
64 Ibid., 31.
65 Ibid.
from an essay by Ray B. West on Mormonism. She grants that his remark was merely "suggested, without elaboration." Shipps claims that "a careful reading of the Book of Mormon and of the prophet’s personal history indicates that the religious experiences described therein are typical of the mystical experience that most students of comparative religion posit at the genesis of all the world’s enduring religious faiths." She mentions essays by Evelyn Underhill and Rufus Jones, whom she describes as "two outstanding historians of mysticism," who "have clearly shown ... that the mystic comprehends an objectively real relationship between himself and the metaphysical world in the course of his interior religious experience." She then asserts that Joseph Smith’s accounts of his visions "are nearly classic statements of mystical experiences.

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69 Ibid., emphasis in the original.
72 Ibid., 31–32.
73 Ibid., 32. According to Thomas G. Alexander, "unfortunately, both scholars and Mormon writers have generally failed to consider Mormonism as falling within the tradition of Christian mysticism. The principle exception is Jan Shipps’ perceptive suggestion of a mystical interpretation of Joseph Smith’s thought." Thomas G. Alexander, "Wilford Woodruff and the Changing Nature of Mormon Religious Experience," *Church History* 45/1 (March 1976): 60, citing Shipps, "The Mormons in Politics," 22–23 (sic, actually 31–33). Four years later, on 11 November 1980, Shipps sent me an eleven-page, single-spaced letter in reply to seven questions I had asked her on 12 August 1980 concerning her views on whether Joseph Smith was a mystic and the Book of Mormon a mystical text. In this letter she explained that when she wrote her dissertation she was not well informed on either mysticism or Mormon origins and she was also unaware of Nibley’s analysis. She also indicated that prior to her essay entitled "The Prophet Puzzle" in 1974 she had undergone a significant shift in orientation and no longer thought, for example, that Joseph Smith should be described as a mystic. But she also staunchly defended Alexander’s 1976 effort to read mysticism into Mormonism, which he rested in large part on an opinion expressed in her dissertation in 1965.
But Nibley, drawing on Rufus Jones and others, has argued that Joseph Smith was not a mystic.

The foremost present-day Protestant student of mysticism writes: "From the nature of the case this experience of ecstasy and absorption is something unutterable and incommunicable. . . . It is not like anything else, consequently there are no terms of description for it." The mystic, having found God, "cannot hint to human ears any descriptive circumstances about the actual character of God."74

Nibley then adds the following observation:

As against this, the whole calling of a prophet is to communicate the will of God to men; he is a mouthpiece and a witness, and he tells what he has seen and heard; he is a man with a message. The mystic, on the other hand, has no such message. Mr. Rufus Jones becomes positively indignant at the thought of contaminating mystic purity with anything as crass and tangible as a message. Mystics, he says, "have not had secret messages from sociable angels. They have not been granted special communications as favored ambassadors to the heavenly court. They have been men and women like the rest of us," and their mystical experience is rather an enrichment of the individual mind, an increase of its range and depth, an enlarged outlook on life, a heightening of personality. It is much like what happens with the refinement and culture of artistic taste, or with the appreciation of beauty in any field. In other words, the visions of mystics are not like those of prophets at all. What they convey is not knowledge, says Jones, but rather an "increase of serenity."75

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74 Nibley, "Prophets and Mystics," in CWHN 3:102, quoting Rufus Jones, emphasis in the original.
75 Ibid., 102–3.
Joseph Smith, whatever else one might say about him, claimed to have gotten "messages from sociable angels," to have possessed plates containing a massive history, and so forth. Neither his story nor the Book of Mormon fits the typical description of mystics and mystical theology. Still, perhaps because Shipps had not attributed fraud to Joseph Smith nor signs of abnormal psychology, at least one RLDS and two LDS historians found her views attractive. They seemed to assume that she had found in mysticism a middle ground between prophet and fraud. Joseph Smith pictured as a mystic and the Book of Mormon as a mystical text constitutes a middle ground between genuine prophet and fraud, but certainly not between prophet and not-prophet.76

Marvin S. Hill, without drawing on Shipps, Thomas G. Alexander, or Paul M. Edwards,77 developed his own habit of linking mysticism, superstition, and magic in his explanation of Joseph Smith.78 In his biography of Wilford Woodruff, Alexander has somewhat muted his theory that visions, inspired translations, and revelations are instances of mystical religious experience.79

76 Thomas G. Alexander made the theory advanced by Shipps the grounds for his understanding of divine special revelations. See Alexander’s "Wilford Woodruff and the Changing Nature of Mormon Religious Experience," 60-61, 69; and his "The Place of Joseph Smith in the Development of American Religion: A Historiographical Inquiry," Journal of Mormon History 5 (1978): 14–15; and his review of Donna Hill, Joseph Smith: The First Mormon, in American Historical Review 82/2 (April 1978): 517–18. In this review, Alexander praises Donna Hill for her treatment of "various aspects of culture evident not only in the experiences of Joseph Smith but also the expectations of those who followed him. Thus, Joseph Smith could quite easily combine money digging, peep-stones, and mystical experience into a whole which was congruent to him, and to those who shared his world view" (p. 518). But Donna Hill does not mention mysticism—that is part of Marvin S. Hill’s explanation of Joseph Smith.


By 1988 Shipps felt that a fondness for "their folk religion" allowed the Latter-day Saints "to embrace the occult as well" as the Bible, "although neither in a mystical sense nor in a superstitious frame." So mysticism appears to have somewhat receded from her formal arsenal of explanations. At least the word has mostly disappeared, though much of what the word typically identifies in the scholarly literature is retained. Why?

**Avoiding a Logomachy**

Shipps reports discovering very early that "what 'outsiders' write about Mormonism draws special attention to itself, both within and without the LDS community." She admits that she "did not always stop to think through all the implications of everything" that she wrote in her dissertation. She soon began to see a multitude of audiences having "two extremes: active, intense, serious, literal-minded Mormons are located at one end, while active, intense, serious, literal-minded anti-Mormons are located at the other. At both of these extremes, people confuse the study of Mormonism with the investigation of its truth claims."

How has Shipps managed to avoid offending or annoying the various audiences who might encounter her work? For one thing, she insists that she has steadfastly "managed to keep truth questions 'bracketed out' through all [her] years of study. To a significant degree, this has been a conscious scholarly strategy adopted to provide . . . enough distance to be analytical." Her wise strategy is to avoid stating overt opinions on the truth claims of the faith of Latter-day Saints.

How does Shipps deal with those who are believers? She explains her strategy in the following way:

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82 See ibid., throughout.
83 Shipps, "An 'Inside-Outsider' in Zion," 140.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., 142, emphasis in the original.
86 Ibid., 143.
Because literal acceptance of the Book of Mormon automatically turns people into Latter-day Saints (whether they join the Church or not), my non-Mormon status makes it obvious that I am not to be counted among the millions for whom the Book of Mormon’s content is prima facie evidence that the book is precisely what it claims to be.87

She adds, however, that in discussing the Book of Mormon she does not feel compelled to take a position on the disputed issue of whether Joseph Smith was the author or translator of this extraordinary work. The content of this basic LDS scripture and the connection between its content and its function within Mormonism are the issues about the Book of Mormon which are of the greatest concern for me.88

She sees the issue of the Book of Mormon’s authorship as “a faith question” which she strives “to bracket out of consideration” in her work on Mormon things.89

It appears that once Shipps began to sense that academic success depended on her skill in avoiding giving offense to the various audiences that might be consumers of her essays, her writing would henceforth not be au naturel—plain or unaffected; it would be fashioned with different audiences in mind. Her writing, as the current fashions in literary criticism would insist, is thus profoundly and intentionally political; that is, it is intended to hide as much as it reveals.

Referring to what she describes as her “stubborn silence on fundamental LDS faith issues,” she claims that this silence sets her “apart from many . . . ‘Gentile’ compatriots whose work is, at bedrock, dedicated to disproving the ‘Mormonism is true’ proposition.”90 As a Methodist, she see herself “squarely in the mainstream of traditional evangelical Christianity.”

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87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
Mormon things is not "to prove false Mormonism's exclusive claim as the only really legitimate form of Christianity," nor is she interested in trying "to prove the counterclaim that [a] conservative brand of evangelical Protestantism is the only really legitimate form of Christianity." She is an observer, but an outside-insider observer.

**Are Theories Really Neutral?**

In *Mormonism*, Shipps makes much of her having appropriated sophisticated theoretical models to assist her in uncovering the secrets of Mormon faith (p. xi).

In everyday life Mormons have no need for theoretical models or sophisticated conceptual frameworks to understand Mormonism. They know that theirs is the Restored Gospel, . . . reestablished on the earth under the leadership of a prophet in these, the latter days, the new "Dispensation of the Fulness of Times." But unless suitable analogues are found to enable non-Mormons to make sense of the Restoration, . . . avoiding misconceptions and misunderstandings is almost impossible.

Why? Because it is impossible for an unbeliever to see a faith ultimately as *sui generis*? That can hardly be the case, for she also insists that her current "perspective . . . regards Mormonism as *sui generis*" (a Latin expression meaning something like unique, of a class by itself, its own kind of thing). Hers is a "history of a *sui generis* set of peculiar people."

Shipps seems to be saying that Gentiles need some analogies in order to understand the faith of the Saints. But the Saints understand the Restored Gospel without secular analogies or conceptual frameworks or theoretical models. Are we confident that

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91 Ibid.
92 Ibid., 143–44.
93 Ibid., 158.
94 Ibid., 160.
95 Shipps, “Writing about Modern Mormonism,” 44.
our audiences will not be led astray, diverted, confused by the use of social science or religious studies jargon?

What Shipps is really talking about is finding an adequate secular theory to account for Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. In introducing her remarks on how best to avoid misconceptions and misunderstandings, she reports a conversation in which Paul M. Edwards (an RLDS luminary and one of her close friends) said to her: "Jan, every time we talk you have a different theory to account for Mormonism." Various theoretical models, conceptual frameworks, or analogies thus provide her with a "theory to account for Mormonism." Shipps explains that if Paul Edwards's observation overstated somewhat the rapidity with which I had moved from one theoretical model to the next in my extended search for adequate analogies, it nevertheless captured the essence of my efforts to deal with my ever-expanding amount of information by searching for a conceptual framework to fit my body of Mormon data without leaving any significant part unexplained.97

Shipps is aware of the procession of fashions among historians attempting to explain the past.

Because socio-political and politico-economic explanations were advanced in the early sixties in the field of history to account for just about everything that ever happened in the past, I started out in Mormon history using more or less secular models, picturing Mormonism as a social movement, an economic movement, a political movement.98

How has her analysis avoided becoming just another in the parade of flawed explanations?

Instead of looking for analogues to Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon in the Christian world, she explains, she "came

96 Shipp s, "An 'Inside-Outsider' in Zion," 158.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
to understand that really useful analogues for Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon are simply not found in the history of Christianity. And so I was forced to abandon my idea that Mormonism is only a subdivision of this historic religious tradition." Americans, she realizes, are rather uninformed on the Mormon past. Professional historians can open up that past to them by providing them with explanations of what presumably "really happened."

The tale of an unsophisticated farm boy who found some engraved metal plates and used "magic spectacles" to translate therefrom a thousand years of pre-Columbian American history appears so incredible to many non-Mormons that they simply dismiss the prophet's visions as hallucinations, regard his "golden bible" as a worthless document, and wonder how any intelligent person could ever accept it as true. Serious critics look at the Book of Mormon more closely. Using as evidence its obvious parallels to other 19th century accounts tying the American Indian to Israel's lost tribes, its descriptions of situations, incidents and characters suspiciously like those within Joseph Smith's ken, its echoes of Masonic lore, its Isaiah passages and its bountiful supply of anachronisms, they conclude that the work is not only worthless but a fraud.100

The problem, for Shipps, with either of these common gentile approaches to the Book of Mormon is that from her perspective they fail to appreciate that, for those who accept the book "at face value," it melds "disparate individuals" into a single people by providing "them a usable past and a common set of expectations."101 She is, of course, right about this. And this rather prosaic insight may be her primary contribution. But her point turns out to be merely a way of saying that Latter-day Saints actually accept the Book of Mormon at face value and it constitutes what I like to describe as both the grounds and content of the faith and

99 Ibid., 160.
101 Ibid., 30.
memory of the Saints. What Shipps does not address in a satisfactory manner is the much more difficult question of why the Saints believe that the Book of Mormon is true—why it constitutes a reality that both explains the past, anchors the present—whatever the evils currently being confronted—and addresses the future with a genuine hope.

Why then do the Saints believe that the Book of Mormon is true? The answer provided by Shipps is both circular and superficial: the Saints, she claims, believe that the Book of Mormon is true because it was “defined as truth by the prophet whose rising up was prophesied therein, the book became true for those who believed, in much the same way that the entire body of Christian Scripture has become true for biblical literalists.”102 Those for whom the Bible is no longer true will quickly grasp the point she is making. Thus her presumably detached, neutral approach to the Book of Mormon is intended to allow her to rise above even the stance taken by those she describes as “serious critics” who see it as “not only worthless but a fraud” because of what she sees as its numerous weaknesses; it is, she insists, nevertheless to be regarded “as the product of an extraordinary and profound act of the religious imagination.”103 She is silent on what might constitute such an imagination.

Perhaps it is possible to see what Shipps thinks were the sources for the Book of Mormon—in her language, Joseph Smith’s “religious imagination”—in her public endorsement of the Brooke book. This book is the most recent, ingenious, and inaccurate version of F. M. Brodie’s earlier effort at explaining away what Shipps correctly understands as the very foundation of the faith of the Saints. Brooke’s book, whatever else one might say about it, is clearly not neutral. When confronting prophetic truth claims, the theories employed to explain them are never neutral. The Book of Mormon, in the language already quoted from C. S. Lewis, “is either a fact, or a legend, or a lie.”

102 Ibid., Shipps has the unfortunate habit of referring to those who accept the Book of Mormon as true in the past tense. Of course, then and there the Saints accepted the book at face value, but here and now they continue to do so, despite what those Shipps calls “serious critics” have had to say about it.
103 Ibid.
Shipps has undertaken the difficult task of explaining Mormons to skeptical Gentiles, while not offending the Saints. That she has stumbled occasionally and not satisfied everyone should not overshadow her accomplishments, even though Mormonism is not a book of rigorous scholarship or deep learning, but a sympathetic, cautiously worded, highly generalized work which approaches the explanation of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon rather temperately on a kind of sociological (or what might also be called a popularized religious studies) plane. As I have shown, the portions of the book that might be of interest to readers of this review are really cautious extensions or elaborations of themes, resting on naturalistic assumptions, initially set out much earlier in her career.