1997

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Daniel C. Peterson

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Editor’s Introduction: Through a Glass, Darkly

Daniel C. Peterson, with John Gee


1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

Introduction to the current issue, including editor’s picks. So-called biblical scholarship is supposed to be able to differentiate between authors of various texts. A test devised by students for their professor showed some of the flaws of those methods. Though critics complain about the lack of archaeological evidence supporting the Book of Mormon, even the Bible has few archaeological supports.
Editor’s Introduction:
Through a Glass, Darkly

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I have reiterated over again what I have said before.
— Robert F. Wagner, former mayor of New York

Not long ago, I had the experience along with one or two others of working with a young man whose scattered readings about science (he himself was a history major) had inspired him to reject the existence of God. Rather ironically for an ecclesiastical leader, I found myself obligated to try to create doubt in his mind, attempting to talk him out of a scientistic dogmatism that had left no room in his mind for the religious faith he had once treasured.

Skepticism of the alleged certainties delivered up by science and scholarship has been an occasional theme in my writings for this Review.1 (My thinking along these lines probably began back in high school, when I ran across a book by a British chemist, Anthony Standen, which made an interesting case for the proposition that, as its title succinctly expressed the theme, Science Is a

Sacred Cow.)\(^2\) This skepticism has also, now that I think about it, figured rather prominently in my teaching and in my scholarly work: The new Islamic Translation Series, for which I am the managing editor, has just published as its first volume a very famous work by the great medieval Muslim thinker Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī. This book, the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* or *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, forcefully confronts the most overtly Hellenized writers of the classical Arabic and Persian traditions. It contends that their supposedly ironclad arguments, which represented the elite, prestigious, and advanced thought of the day—an ancient science, really—but which also led to positions that contradicted orthodox Islamic (and Jewish and Christian) belief, were neither certain nor irrefutable. Accordingly, said al-Ghazālī, the contrast that some wanted to draw between a worldview based on revelation (subrational and dubious at best), and one—often implicitly or explicitly anti-religious—based solely on rigorous reasoning applied to indisputable evidence, was false. Indeed, for some of its advocates it was nothing less than self-serving. The reasoning of the anti-religious worldview was not so rigorous as it claimed, and the evidence supporting it was far from unassailable.\(^3\)

This issue continues to be relevant today. (The recent Hollywood film *Contact*, based on a novel by the late astronomer and science popularizer Carl Sagan, is an effective current presentation of one side of the question.) And Phillip E. Johnson, a law professor at the University of California at Berkeley of whom I have written earlier in this *Review*, continues to serve as an incisive critic of materialistic ideology masquerading as science, smuggling atheistic presuppositions into its conclusions.\(^4\)

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\(^3\) Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1997). The books of the series are distributed by the University of Chicago Press.

It is not that I am anti-science. Years after giving up my youthful plans to be either a pure mathematician or a theoretical physicist, I still read somewhat in these and related fields. Besides, as will be shown, I do not limit my skepticism to the biological and physical sciences. Nor am I even remotely a relativist or a nihilist. But I think it critically important to maintain a certain humility before the complexities of the cosmos and the obscurities of history. Doubt can be an eloquent invitation to think, as René Descartes might have noted. And it is not at all clear that a science built upon crudely materialistic presuppositions will ever be able to deliver the exhaustive explanation of the entire cosmos that, as voices from some quarters constantly assure us, is just around the corner—despite the fact that reductionist scientism appears to derive a great deal of its authority among laypeople from precisely this unsubstantiated promise. In a recent book review, for example, physicist Stephen Barr raises the issue of qualia, pointing out that what he calls “simple-minded materialism” “cannot explain why an apple looks red,” that physics is unable to account for “the sensual experience of redness.”

Coincidentally, and although he thinks that the primary work of psychology may well be done within the next few decades, so that the discipline will soon have attained “closure”—how many times in the history of science have we heard analogous claims?—MIT’s Steven Pinker, an outspokenly confirmed materialist and evolutionist, also predicts that one of the deepest mysteries posed by the mind may never be solved: why neural information processing is accompanied by subjective experience, or sentience. ‘How could an event of neural information-processing cause the feel of a tooth-

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ache or the taste of lemon or the color purple?" Pinker writes.6 Thus, our subjective awareness of self and other—the most irreducible, basic, and undeniable aspect of our individual experience—seems to elude the aspirations of imperialist scientism.

This Review, of course, cannot possibly take on every argument of every critic of the church or treat every position or claim that might be injurious to faith in general. It has no intention even to try. And it has other purposes besides polemics. Fortunately, though, many of the arguments with which we deal—actually, a depressingly large number of them—recur in book after book, in pamphlet after pamphlet, so that responding to a single argument can help to dispose of a numerous brood of its genetic siblings. Indeed, responding to a single class of argument can be useful. Alert readers can certainly extend the Review’s printed responses to other, analogous propositions and critical claims.

It does little harm, it seems to me, to maintain a healthy skepticism whenever anybody or any book asserts something contradictory to the restored gospel as being “the assured result of modern biblical scholarship” or denies the possibility of something else because archaeology has failed to find proof or evidence for it. Experts can be wrong. Everyone knows this is so in matters of personal investment. Just weeks before the disastrous stock collapse of 1929 that led to the Great Depression, a leading economist by the name of Irving Fisher was assuring everybody that, indeed, there might soon be a recession, but surely nothing in the nature of a crash. Only nine days before they plummeted, he declared that “Stock prices have reached what looks like a permanently high plateau.”7 Similar statements could be gathered from a variety of fields. Significantly, though, experts in biblical

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6 As reported in John Horgan, “Darwin on His Mind,” Lingua Franca (November 1997): 47; see 40–8. Stephen W. Hawking, A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes (New York: Bantam, 1990), thinks that we are approaching the end of physics—a notion that, my friend Stephen D. Ricks (who was there) tells me, led the eminent Catholic historian and philosopher of science Fr. Stanley Jaki, during a seminar in Philadelphia in the summer of 1989, to pronounce Hawking’s book both arrogant and ignorant.

7 I have run into Fisher’s comments in several places, but at the present time the best source I can find for them is, perhaps appropriately, Ross Petras and Kathryn Petras, The 776 Stupidest Things Ever Said (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 52.
studies and archaeology, where the inferences drawn can have even more significant consequences than a poorly performing stock portfolio, are no more infallible than elsewhere.

To illustrate what I mean, here are two brief sketches:

Creative Misreading

Some years ago, three bright students of the ancient Near East approached one of their professors with a proposal. The professor, whose identity we shall mask under the pseudonym of “Julie Wellhouse,” is a first-rate biblical scholar with a growing international reputation, who is fervently committed to the cutting-edge methods and rather skeptical assumptions of her field. Dr. Wellhouse agreed to their proposal, which their ringleader, whom we shall style “Gadfly,” had designed as a kind of test. It is a test which, for reasons that you will surely see, I would like to administer to the entire membership of the Society of Biblical Literature.

Much of contemporary biblical research rests on the claimed ability of scholars to detect supposed seams and interpolations in the texts as we now have them—for instance, to recognize multiple authors in Genesis and to distinguish the original (proto-)Isaiah from his supposed disciples and imitators, Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah. Theories based on this purported ability have done much to undermine the authority of the Bible in many circles. Since, however, we do not actually possess separate manuscripts of the several Isaiahs or of the diverse documents that are said to have gone into the extant text of Genesis, the existence of these various pseudonymous authors must be assumed. Contemporary scholarship therefore seeks with great learning and subtlety to render their existence more likely by appealing to manifold arguments based upon the books as we actually have them today.

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8 I know both the students and the scholar and have heard something of this incident from both sides. The student whom I term Gadfly supplied the test documents and Prof. Wellhouse’s responses to me, for which I am grateful. I suppress the names of the participants in the test because the intent here is to illustrate a general point, not to embarrass any particular person. I have also corrected obvious minor typographical errors, to avoid possible distraction—but only where they are not relevant to the discussion.
Most critical biblical scholars tend to use such arguments with considerable confidence.

The test that the students proposed was devised to measure the ability of Dr. Wellhouse to separate accurately the various authors of an allegedly composite document. Accordingly, Gadfly wrote up three quasi-biblical narratives, of about one page each. He was then to give each to one of the other students, who would do to it what tendentious biblical editors are supposed to have done in ancient Israel.

The first text read as follows, with numbered divisions supplied by Prof. Wellhouse in the course of her analysis and retained here for ease of reference:

(1) And it came to pass that as Samuel walked along the seashore, that he saw a man clothed in white robes who said to him, “Whither goest thou?” Samuel answered and said, “I go to the house of Egal my sister’s son.” (2) “Go not to the house of Egal for he walketh in the way of truth; he hath no need of thee. (3) But go rather to the house of Ezrael and tell him that he must repent and turn unto the Lord and put away the harlot which is with him, for that which he doeth is an abomination in the sight of the Lord thy God. (4) If therefore, he shall repent and turn unto the Lord and offer up the offering which the Lord commanded his servant Moses, then he shall live indeed but if not, then he shall surely die.”

(3a) So Samuel went unto the house of Ezrael and said those things which were commanded of the angel, but Ezrael hearkened not unto the voice of the Lord his God, nor to the voice of Samuel his servant. (6) And the Lord was wroth with Ezrael for he continued to do that which was evil in the sight of God. (7) And the Lord smote Ezrael with worms in that he died and miserable was his death.

(8) But Egal hearkened unto the voice of the Lord his God and the Lord prospered him upon the land which the Lord his God gave him. (9) And the Lord gave unto Egal flocks and herds and grapes and wheat and seed and sons and daughters and many servants
and dreams and visions for Egal walked in the way of righteousness and his heart was upright before the Lord his God.

The obliging Professor Wellhouse responded at some length, clearly (and, given her superb training and undisputed acuity, justifiably) confident of success:

The "Installment One Text":
A Literary-Critical Examination

Presuppositions: two authors or editors, and the order of the text has not been changed in development.

Solutions to the nature of the story’s composite nature must begin with interruptions of logic. To be sure, a single writer is capable of inconsistency. But when inconsistency destroys the purpose of the piece or raises more questions than the goal of the piece seems to allow for, such inconsistency should be thought of as perhaps arising from multiple editors.

This particular analysis was more difficult than the other two. It seems that there was much more interweaving of secondary material and hence it became difficult to sort it out.

There is main contradiction between s. 2 and s. 8: in s. 2 Samuel is told not to go to the house of Egal whereas s. 8 which has Egal repenting seems to indicate that Samuel did go to Egal’s house. The contradiction is deeper: s. 2 says that Samuel doesn’t need to go to Egal “for he walketh in the way of truth; he hath no need of thee.” S. 8 however has Egal repenting; i.e., he doesn’t walk in the way of truth. This contradiction indicates that the material in s. 2 is secondary. It indicates that the original story was about Samuel going to Egal (supposedly wicked), Samuel’s calling Egal to repentance, and Egal’s repentance. The revised story is about Samuel being diverted to another task (as we will see, to go to Ezrael).

It is not easy to sort out the other material, but some general lines can be charted. The first part of s. 3
("But go rather to the house of Ezrael") goes with the revised story of s. 2: Samuel is not to go to Egal, but to Ezrael. It is not clear, however, if the rest of s. 3 and s. 4 are secondary. I tentatively leave out of the original everything after "turn to the Lord" in s. 3 and s. 4. The reason for this is that Egal's repentance and consequent blessing in ss. 8–9 does not comport with the seriousness of the sin in s. 3 and the sacrificial requirement of s. 4. The severity of sin, however, fits the secondary and hardened Ezrael better (cf. ss. 5–7). S. 3 would have run originally: "Go and tell him that he must repent and turn unto the Lord." The verb "go" at the first part of s. 3 is retained.

Ss. 5–7 seem to be part of the Ezrael material except the first phrase "So Samuel went unto the house of Ezrael." Ezrael here would have originally been Egal. The second part of s. 5 about Ezrael not repenting and God's wrath in 6–7 are inconsistent with the supposed original Egal story in which Egal repents. Hence ss. 5b–7 can be considered secondary as part of the Ezrael material.9

Finally, ss. 8–9 are part of the original Egal story. The conjunction "but" is apparently an addition, to adapt it now (contrastively) to the two-person story. The last phrase ("for Egal . . .") may be secondary; note its similarity to s. 2. But it is possible that s. 2 derives from this part of the text, and thus it may be original.

The original story supposedly was this:

And it came to pass that as Samuel walked along the seashore, that he saw a man clothed in white robes who said to him, "Whither goest thou?" Samuel answered and said, "I go to the house of Egal my sister's son." "Go and tell him that he must repent and turn unto the Lord." So Samuel went unto the house of Egal. And Egal hearkened unto the voice of the Lord

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9 At this point, a handwritten marginal note from Prof. Wellhouse reads: "If all of 3–4 are original, then everything in s. 5 up to 'angel' (except for the name Ezrael) could be original."
his God and the Lord prospered him upon the land which the Lord his God gave him. And the Lord gave unto Egal flocks and herds and grapes and wheat and seed and sons and daughters and many servants and dreams and visions, (for Egal walked in the way of righteousness and his heart was upright before the Lord his God).

Thus, with cogent reasoning very much like that applied by herself and her colleagues to real biblical texts, Professor Wellhouse identified two authors in the first document, each with different intent. She offered relatively lengthy explanations in support of her analysis. But she was completely wrong. Gadfly was the sole author of the narrative. He had composed it in about fifteen minutes, at one sitting, and then, as his only subsequent action, run it through a computer spell-checker.

Was Professor Wellhouse misled by her unfounded expectations of multiple authorship? Very likely. But it is not clear that her expectation (fed, in this case, by the students who had constructed the test) is altogether different from the expectations of contemporary biblical scholars as they are fed by current theological fashions and ideologies and nurtured in liberal divinity schools. (Isaac M. Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, of the University of California at Berkeley, make an interesting attempt in their book Before Abraham Was: The Unity of Genesis 1-11 to show just how unsubstantiated the assumption of multiple authorship is in the case of the opening chapters of the Bible.)

Professor Wellhouse did considerably better with the second text. Gadfly had taken somewhat more time on it, and it actually did have two authors:

And the word of the Lord came to Admu, a man saying, “If a man among you shall eat banana peels, it is an evil thing before the Lord your God. Remember that the Most High commanded that banana peels be

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10 Isaac M. Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, Before Abraham Was: The Unity of Genesis 1-11 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989). It seems to me, furthermore, that some of the analysis offered by leaders in the burgeoning Bible-as-literature field (e.g., by Robert Alter) strongly suggests other ways of understanding the biblical narratives, for instance, than by atomizing them.
evil after your escape from Egypt where banana-
masters enslaved you. He shall be unclean and shall go
outside the camp of the presence and take an emetic
and wash himself and his clothes and eat three pome-
granate seeds without the rind and shall be unclean un-
til evening. And at the dawn of the next day he shall
present himself before the priest and his counselors and
make an offering of three bananas of yellow, without
blemish, one to the priest and one to each counselor.
And one of the counselors the priest shall raise the ba-
nanas before the altar and shall peel one and eat it and
burn the peel upon the altar; he shall dispose of the
ashes without the camp. And the other two shall he set
aside in a sacred place for a week until they become
black, or if they be not black after one week then shall
he wait another week. Then shall the priest and his two
counselors bring the bananas and shall burn the peels
upon the altar, remember to dispose the ashes of the
evil peels without the camp; but the bananas shall they
give unto their families to make banana bread. Now it
is unseemly that bananas be limited to the priest and
withold from the camp of the congregation when the
Most High forbade all Israel from them other than sac-
rifice in remembrance of the escape from the banana-
enslavers. No bananas shall be eaten and all Israel shall
cringe at the sight of banana peels.

In her response to this second document, which she entitled
“A Literary-Critical Analysis of the ‘Wise Moses’ (Musa sapien-
tum/’Second Shot’) Text,” Professor Wellhouse was able to detect
two authors, thus making it a composite text, and to conclude cor-
rectly that the expansions the document had undergone had not
affected the overall order of its contents. However, the third and
final text, which had been written by Gadfly and then modified by
one of the other students, evidently left Professor Wellhouse com-
pletely mystified. She recognized a “light” and “deft” “edito-
rial hand,” as Gadfly recalls, but was unable to disentangle the two
contributors to the final draft:
(1) And it came to pass that David ben Imo returned unto his tent and called his kinfolk and his friends together and said unto them, (2) “I mourn for the wickedness which I have seen among the people of the east, for the people of the east, they have waxed strong in iniquity and do commit many whoredoms in following gods made of wood and stone which things are most abominable [sic] in the sight of the Lord our God. (3) Wherefore I fear, said David ben Imo, lest the Lord shall smite them for their evil and abominations which arise before him.”

(4) And the kinfolk and friends of David ben Imo did mourn exceedingly [sic] in behalf of the people of the east, insomuch that they were cut to the very center because of the wickedness [sic] of their brethren. (5) And yet their sorrow could not blot out the wickedness of the deeds of the people. (6) And they said one to another, “If the people of the East be now turned unto wickedness and their deeds be evil, how shall we esace [sic] the sins of this people and the wrath of God which shall surely be poured out upon us?” (7) And there was much sorrow on account of the wickedness of the people of the East among the clan of David ben Imo; and they wept bitterly, insomuch that they did refuse to be comforted.

In her response to this last document, which she entitled “The Beloved Sour Cream Substitute: A Literary-Critical Analysis of the ‘David ben-Imo and Folk’ Text,” Professor Wellhouse wrote:

The assumptions for this analysis are that (1) there are two writers/editors, (2) expansions or changes that have taken place have not changed the order of the text.

Of the three pieces, this one seems to be the most unified. Spelling mistakes/typographical errors have not been considered as evidence of discrete authorship (e.g., abominible, v. 2; exceedingly; wickedness, v. 4). If there is compositeness, it would seem to be in vv. 6–7. V. 6 begins to go in a different direction,
apparently, from everything up through v. 5. David returns to his kin and friends. He tells them of the wickedness of the east-people. He mourns for their wickedness. It seems this is mourning of pity, not terror (on the difference between pity and terror, see Joyce, *Portrait of an [sic] Artist as a Young Man*). David is not fearing for himself (or his kin and friends), but pities the wicked state of the east-people. His fear, indeed, is that the Lord will smite them, that is, the east-people. David’s kin and friends mourn for the east people; this seems to be, by its context, for pity and not for fear about their own situation. V. 5 indicates that their mourning was somehow intended to atone for the sins of the east-people. In contrast to all this, v. 6 has the kin and friends saying that they have something to fear about: the sins of “this people” (is this the east-people or David’s kin and friends?) and God’s wrath. Instead of pity, there is fear for oneself. The separation of vv. 6–7 from the foregoing is supported (but not determined) by the occurrence of “East” (with a capital E) in vv. 6–7 versus “east” (lower case e) in the foregoing verses. Also indicative of this separation is the use of “the clan of David” without mention of friends (v. 7) instead of “his kinfolk and his friends” (vv. 1, 4). Finally, v. 7 talks of bitter mourning versus deep sorrow in vv. 4–5. This is not a primary criterion but it does indicate a slightly different direction in narrative focus.

Professor Wellhouse thus felt quite strongly that vv. 6–7 of the final text were by a different hand. She was, however, largely mistaken in this, and she failed to recognize editorial interpolations and modifications elsewhere. I now reproduce the text with those portions italicized that represent additions made by the second author to the original document as Gadfly first wrote it, and with the parts stricken through that the second author or redactor omitted:

(1) And it came to pass that David ben Imo returned unto his tent and called his kinfolk and his
friends together and said unto them, "I mourn for the wickedness which I have seen among the people of the east, for the people of the east, they have waxed strong in iniquity and do commit many whoredoms in following gods made of wood and stone which things are most abominable [sic] in the sight of the Lord our God. (3) Wherefore I fear, said David ben Imo, lest the Lord shall smite them for their evil and abominations which arise before him.

(4) And the kinfolk and friends of David ben Imo did mourn exceedingly [sic] in behalf of the people of the east, insomuch that they were cut to the very center because of the wickness [sic] of their brethren. (5) And yet their sorrow could not blot out the wickedness of the deeds of the people. (6) And they said one to another, "If the people of the East, who had once been a righteous people, be now turned unto wickedness and their deeds be evil, how shall we escape [sic] the sins of this generation people and the wrath of God which shall surely be poured out upon them us?" (7) And there was much sorrow on account of the wickedness of the people of the East among the clan of David ben Imo; and they wept bitterly, insomuch that they did refuse to be comforted.

Overall, Professor Wellhouse's performance in this test was not particularly impressive. As Gadfly himself summarizes the results, her

analysis split the texts into two main parts. The most successful of the divisions was on the second text, where she correctly spotted the main insertions and even detected one of the small insertions, although her analysis did not pinpoint exactly what had happened. This is an encouraging sign for the method. Unfortunately, the first text was most beautifully divided into

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11 I have modified (redacted!) Gadfly's summary and conclusions to eliminate typographical errors, as well as a few stylistic infelicities that come from hasty writing, and, not least, in order to mask the real identity of Julie Wellhouse. Try to reconstruct the original!
the original text and the redaction; the analysis was truly brilliant, but this was the unified text. Thus, a brilliant and persuasive division of a text into multiple authors proves nothing; it can still be completely wrong. The third text was split on completely wrong lines and was suspected of being of one authorship; but the division was along the wrong lines.

Two related problems surfaced in the course of this study which I had not anticipated, but might have had I given it some thought; Dr. Wellhouse had anticipated some of this. Replacements and deletions by the redactor are almost completely undetectable to the critic and there is nothing which would help restore these changes. It would be an extremely daring critic who would try to restore these parts of the text, and, to my knowledge, short of having a copy of the Urtext, there would also be no way to really test the suppositions.

Another problem emerged in the second text, which was a spoof of Mosaic ritual. The redactor added two phrases which I would have added had I thought of them. In that way, they actually serve the interests of the first author of the text and should have been part of the Urtext. This leaves a very perplexing question of intent. Can an editor with the same intent be detected? And even if he is, can we say that such additions do not belong to the text?

And it must be stressed that Professor Wellhouse is one of the more intelligent and proficient of contemporary biblical scholars. One wonders, therefore, how much we can actually rely on the supposedly “assured” results of contemporary biblical scholarship. For, as we have noted, such scholarship, in turn, rests to a substantial degree on confident claims of ability to dissect the books, the chapters, and even the verses of the Bible in minute detail. If a professor who knows her students well finds it difficult to take apart a text that they have composed in her native language, how likely is it that modern scholars can, with any degree of accuracy, untangle ancient texts from foreign cultures, based on varying manuscripts, written by people they can never have
met, in old languages imperfectly known, where multiple authorship is less a demonstrated fact than a postulate?

Consider, say, how rarely outsiders writing about Mormonism really get it right. We can dispense, here, with anti-Mormon propagandists. But even well-intentioned journalists, scholars, and the like almost invariably make serious mistakes when they essay to discuss the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This despite the fact that (1) there are roughly ten million living Mormons with whom they can speak at any moment, (2) the scriptures of the Latter-day Saints and other centrally important primary works are available in excellent editions and multiple languages, and (3) the general culture and history in which Mormonism has unfolded are easily accessible to scholars. If they can’t get the Mormons right, what are the chances that our understanding of the ancient Ophite gnostics or the Rekhabites or the sectaries of Qumran is accurate? For, in those instances, as in virtually the entire ancient world, we are dealing with cultures that are entirely vanished, leaving at best only fragmentary texts in often obscure ancient languages.

To quote Gadfly himself,

The first thing which this study seems to call for is a moratorium on splitting up texts into multiple authors, at least until a more extensive and thorough test of the method can be made. Secondly, if our preliminary test is anywhere near accurate, then it would seem to indicate that the critics are correct only about one third of the time. And then there is no way of telling which third is correct. Of course, if the critic’s assumptions are incorrect, he will be wrong all the time. I find it appalling that we claim to have a scientific discipline, yet some of our theories are not subjected to any test whatsoever before they are unmercifully unleashed with full force against the text. Even when a method has been discredited in another field, this does not prevent us from still using the method in the field of biblical studies without the slightest bit of rationale. Such scholarship is naive at best, and dishonest at worst. Perhaps we should be as critical of our methods as of our texts.
Thus, it would seem that source criticism, at least as it is currently practiced by the majority of biblical scholars, is open to serious question. It certainly cannot be described as "scientific," because it cannot be successfully tested—and, as Sir Karl Popper convincingly argued throughout his long and distinguished career, it is testability (indeed, "falsifiability") that is at the very heart of science.

"For some years," reports Baruch Halpern, a leading contemporary biblical scholar,

I have asked students to take singly the sources found, say, in Genesis 6–9 [as scholars typically assume them to be], and, keeping each source's internal sequence intact, to recombine them. Invariably the alternatives are either less logical than [the redactor's] account or so intricate as to atomize the sources.

In other words, when real people (as opposed to theoretical constructs) are assigned the task attributed to the compilers of the Bible—namely, to compose a more or less coherent narrative from disparate sources without rearranging the internal structure of those sources—the result is either illogical, or the task is done in such a way that the source critic's job of recovering the sources becomes impossible.

Modern biblical scholars, for instance, generally claim that the book of Isaiah was actually written by more than one author. But some of the methods they propose for dividing Isaiah into various sections are, to say the least, ambiguous. "The distinction between First Isaiah and Second Isaiah," reports John L. McKenzie in his Anchor Bible commentary, "has been made on the basis of vocabulary, style, and thought." But he later declares that "a vocabulary study according to modern statistical methods . . . simply does not support the thesis of different authorship; nor

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12 The remaining portion of this section relies very largely upon an unpublished discussion of source criticism written by John Gee. Again, I have rewritten it to some extent, but would be most impressed if any reader can retrieve the original merely on the basis of what is printed here.


does it support the thesis of unity of authorship. This is to say that
the vocabulary alone is not decisive. Nor is the style alone any
more decisive.”

Why do most scholars nonetheless insist that Isaiah was written
by different authors? A theologically very liberal friend of mine,
not a member of the church, who is actively and prominently in-
volved in biblical studies, told me about a decade ago that, for
classroom purposes, he once sat down with his collection of com-
mentaries to refresh his memory on the arguments that opponents
of the multiple Isaiah hypothesis advance to ground their rejection
of it. To his surprise, he found that few of his books so much as
mentioned that there are arguments against the idea. “The dis-
tinction between First Isaiah and Second Isaiah is so widely ac-
cepted in modern scholarship,” says McKenzie, “that the argu-
ment against it need not be examined at length.” Obviously,
though, the mere fact that a hypothesis is widely accepted does not
somehow put it beyond possibility of question.

I suspect that the primary basis for the assumption of multiple
Isaiahs is ideological. In other words, it proceeds from the axiom
(widely shared in the scholarly community) that nobody can
know the future. For example, it is said that Isaiah’s prophecy of
the coming of Cyrus (in Isaiah 44:28–45:1) simply “taxes prob-
ability too far” for scholars to accept it. Yet, even if one argues
that “it is not a question of placing limits to the vision of proph-
ecy but of the limits of intelligibility,” this means nothing more,
essentially, than that the scholar believes that the prophet’s audi-
ence would have been incapable of understanding the prophecy.17 But does this constitute valid reason for rejecting the
authenticity of Isaiah’s purported foretelling? I think it does not.
We know of other cases where an audience did not understand a
prophecy (see, for example, Mark 9:31–2; Luke 9:44–5; 18:31–4;
John 12:16; Acts 8:30–1). In fact, Isaiah himself said that many of
his audience would fail to understand his teachings (see Isaiah
6:9–13). Accordingly, the methods by which many scholars do
their work in this regard seem inadequately grounded to yield any
truly certain result.

15 Ibid., xvi.
16 Ibid., xv.
17 The quoted passages are from McKenzie, Second Isaiah, xvi.
It is doubtful, indeed, that source critics can do what they routinely claim to do. An example from slightly beyond the realm of the Bible should serve to illustrate this point. Morris Jastrow Jr. (1861–1922), who was active in both biblical and cuneiform studies, attributed the late version of the *Gilgamesh Epic* to various sources, in a manner similar to that in which biblical scholars like to split the books of the Bible among various authors, known and hypothetical. Indeed, “the methodology of Jastrow and his successors was identical to that being followed at the time in Pentateuchal and Homeric criticism.” But, quite unlike the situation in biblical studies, earlier sources of the *Gilgamesh Epic* turned up later, “differing greatly in detail from Jastrow’s reconstruction of the prehistory of the epic.”\(^{18}\) This was not at all what Jastrow would have expected. (He died before the Sumerian sources appeared.) He had anticipated that the discovery of new fragments would “perfect the analysis in its component parts.”\(^{19}\) Instead, the new finds entirely overturned his analysis. Jastrow was right that the text had sources, but he was almost completely wrong about the details. With the large number of cuneiform sources (and new fragments are still appearing)\(^{20}\) “we can see how extensively the late version, and even the much earlier Old Babylonian version, differ from the Sumerian sources, for example, and how much room there would be for error in trying to reconstruct those sources from the texts of the epic alone. For the literary critic, this is sobering.”\(^{21}\)

Or it should be, at any rate. For source criticism represents a remarkable type of scholarship. The source critics assure us that, given a plate of scrambled eggs, as they often assume the biblical texts to be, they can reassemble the original eggs. This is not only offensive to those who continue to venerate the biblical documents as living texts, and do not choose to see them as scrambled, but it seems, at best, highly improbable. The hair-splitting accuracy of-

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ten claimed by scholars who practice source criticism does not appear, as we have seen, to have much of a basis in testable reality.

Let the consumer of biblical scholarship, even at second hand or in the popular news magazines, beware.

“How Firm a Foundation?”

Critics of the Book of Mormon often declare that a lack of archaeological evidence for the book’s Nephites and Lamanites demonstrates that those peoples never existed, that Joseph Smith was therefore a fraud, and that, accordingly, the faith of the Latter-day Saints is a snare and a delusion.

In doing so, of course, they habitually overlook the considerable evidence for the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon (much of it available through FARMS), and, at least among conservative Christian opponents of the church, they typically exaggerate the strength of archaeological support for the historical claims of the Bible.22 When we make the latter point, some of our more strident adversaries immediately respond that it shows how we hate the Bible. But they misunderstand us, and fundamentally. What we are trying to show—besides, of course, the often glaring double standard of our foes—is the tentativeness and incompleteness of archaeology.23

Most human artifacts perish. Most archaeological sites have not been excavated. What we have, therefore, is only a small portion of the evidence that once existed. This is why the noted biblical historian Edwin Yamauchi has memorably remarked that “The absence of archaeological evidence is not evidence of absence.”24 Those sites that have been excavated may have been

22 This issue is treated in an important article to which, as yet, I have seen not a single cogent reply. See William J. Hamblin, “Basic Methodological Problems with the Anti-Mormon Approach to the Geography and Archaeology of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 161–97.

23 A hilarious satire of archaeology that makes an altogether serious point is David Macaulay’s wonderful *Motel of the Mysteries* (New York: Scholastic, 1993).

handled competently, or they may not have been; the results of the dig may have been published, or they may not have been. And whatever has been found is then subject to errors of interpretation by the archaeologists themselves and errors of application by other scholars seeking to integrate the data into their own theories and interpretations. The opportunities for mistakes are innumerable. Anthropologist John L. Sorenson, in a recently republished article, discusses some of the multiple cultural filters that affect even the writing of family histories.25 How much more so, then, the reconstruction of long-vanished societies from mere pottery fragments?

I was recently told a story that exemplifies nicely how, even with the most conscientious effort and under competent professional direction, archaeological excavation can miss important data.26 The story involves no long-ruined city scattered obscurely in the thick jungles of Guatemala. The archaeologists in this case were not focusing their attentions on something built a millennium (or two or three) ago. They were not chasing a vanished people whose language and records had disappeared. The story concerns the farm in Palmyra, New York, where Joseph Smith Sr. and his family settled in the second decade of the nineteenth century.

The area of the original Smith family cabin—an extraordinarily important structure, in which the young Prophet was living at the time of both the first vision and the initial visit of Moroni—was excavated in 1982, under sponsorship of the Historic Sites Committee of the church. The excavation team was led by Professor Dale L. Berge of Brigham Young University, a specialist in

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26 My account relies upon information kindly supplied to me by Donald L. Enders, of the Museum of Church History and Art in Salt Lake City, and is included here by his generous permission. The 1982 dig is also described in Dale L. Berge, “Archaeological Work at the Smith Log House,” *Ensign* (August 1985): 24–6. A map of the area is conveniently available in the *Ensign* (November 1997): 112.
historic archaeology, and included Donald L. Enders and T. Michael Smith of the Historic Sites Committee. As is commonly done by modern scientific archaeologists, in order to assist in the organization of work and data, the excavation site was divided into several ten-foot (10') squares. In actual physical reality, though, each excavated area in the grid system was a nine foot (9') square, leaving a number of “bulkheads,” two feet (2') wide, on which workers could walk between the uncovered pits. These bulkheads are of fundamental importance in the practice of modern, scientific archaeology; without them, indeed, a dig would be scientifically flawed. Among other things, they help to establish the stratigraphy of the site as well as to provide a system of coordinates for identifying the precise location of any find.

The 1982 excavations were productive. Workers were able, for example, to determine roughly where the Smith cabin was located, and they identified a well outside the home which they opened up to a depth of approximately seven to eleven feet (7–11'). Unfortunately, for budgetary reasons (a very common constraint in archaeological field work, which is appallingly expensive), the 1982 season was short. Only a few of the bulkheads themselves could be investigated, and the team was obliged to conclude its work. There was no return in 1983, nor for a considerable time thereafter.

Fifteen years later, however, now that the purchase of a piece of adjacent property has made it possible, the church is seeking to restore the acreage near the Sacred Grove and around the Smith home to roughly its condition in the mid- to late-1820s. Not surprisingly, this has entailed further research. Fortunately, it has justified further funding.

In the summer of 1997, workers returned to the Smith cabin site. Further examination of the well that the archaeologists had found in 1982 disclosed that it had been dry, and consequently useless. More importantly, for my purposes, excavation of the bulkheads left by earlier work disclosed the location of the drain walls of the cabin. These were marked by trenches—roughly eighteen inches (18") wide, and between twelve and sixteen inches (12–16") deep—filled with stones, on which the logs of the cabin walls rested and which were designed to permit water and melting snow to flow away from the Smith family’s dwelling place. These trenches allow us, now, to know quite accurately the dimensions
and locations of the cabin's walls. The findings of the 1997 team are confirmed by more exact information about the southern boundary of the town of Palmyra than was available to the director of the earlier examination. Metal stakes, placed at the end of the summer’s work, mark the corners of a building whose foundations measure eighteen by thirty feet (18' x 30').

What I find striking about this episode is that the all-important data relating to the shape and dimensions of the cabin were concealed precisely within the bulkheads of the excavation—an excavation that was done according to the procedures suggested in any standard textbook on archaeological method. It is uncannily reminiscent of the old Pat Bagley cartoon where we are shown a cross-section of an archaeological dig somewhere in Central America. In the background looms a Maya pyramid. In the foreground, an archaeologist wearing a pith helmet says to two of his associates, “I’ve looked everywhere and I haven’t found any evidence of a Book of Mormon civilization in America.” But we can see what the archaeologist cannot: In the unexcavated areas between his exploratory trenches, a large item labeled “Jared’s Jug” is clearly visible, along with a buried road sign indicating the direction of Zarahemla (at a distance of “50 Shiz’s”), and a billboard bearing a familiar arch design advertising “McNephi’s.”

If the Smith cabin and farm had been reconstructed on the basis of the 1982 dig, workers would have restored a useless well that supplied no water to the residents. They would, thus, have misled future visitors to the place. And they would have essentially had to guess as to the dimensions of the cabin. These may seem small things. But they demonstrate clearly that, even when the artifacts survive, and even when the site in which they rest is professionally examined, it is fully conceivable that those artifacts might continue to go undiscovered. What if there had been no second session of excavating? Since the overwhelming majority of the world’s archaeological remains have not been uncovered even once, it seems unlikely (to put it mildly) that our picture of the ancient world is complete.

27 Pat Bagley, Treasures of Half-Truth (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986). My critics will be pleased to know that I approve of at least one Signature publication.
Editor's Picks

As I have done in previous issues of the Review, I shall now list certain texts or items treated in the present volume and shall offer my own summary ratings of them. In some cases, I have formed my opinions from personal and direct acquaintance with the materials. In every case, I have determined the rankings after reading the reviews published in this volume, and after further conversations either with the relevant reviewers or with those who assist in the editing of the Review. But the final judgments, and the final responsibility for them, are mine. It is an unavoidably subjective process, and you can give it whatever weight you choose. This is how the rating system works:

**** Outstanding, a seminal work of the kind that appears only rarely.
*** Enthusiastically recommended.
** Warmly recommended.
* Recommended.

Here are the works discussed in this issue of the FARMS Review of Books that I feel myself able to recommend:

**** Donald W. Parry, Jeanette W. Miller, and Sandra A. Thorne, eds., A Comprehensive Annotated Book of Mormon Bibliography—Although this volume is certainly not for everybody, it is a pathbreaking work, competently done, and will prove invaluable to scholars of the Book of Mormon.

**** Donald W. Parry, Jeanette W. Miller, and Sandra A. Thorne, eds., A Guide to Publications on the Book of Mormon: A Selected Annotated Bibliography—In this shorter version of their bibliography, culling the most important entries from the more complete edition, the editors come closer to a book for everybody.

*** Susan Easton Black, ed., Expressions of Faith: Testimonies of Latter-day Saint Scholars—Although (truth be told) I have an essay in this collection, I must still say that a wide range of readers will probably find Expressions of Faith thoughtful and inspiring.
Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon*—I am somewhat embarrassed to recommend four FARMS publications in a row. Book reviewing, though, is a rather idiosyncratic activity, and readers would do well to bear in mind Ambrose Bierce's definition of admiration as "Our polite recognition of another's resemblance to ourselves," and, thus, to take the recommendations of the current chairman of the FARMS Board of Trustees for what they are worth. It would, however, be just as wrong to denigrate a FARMS book out of shyness as to promote it out of vanity. This is a good book.


Terryl L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy*—As readers of this Review are well aware, anti-Mormon bigotry is not merely of historical interest. Prof. Givens's book, however, insightfully provides historical and psychological background for an ongoing phenomenon.

Roger R. Keller, *Book of Mormon Authors: Their Words and Messages*—By analyzing varying uses of terminology, Prof. Keller constructs a case for multiple authorship in the Book of Mormon. This is a conclusion to which others have come on the basis of statistics and stylometry, and for which I think there is strong subjective evidence. An important and interesting treatment, in my view.

Hoyt W. Brewster Jr., *Isaiah Plain and Simple: The Message of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*—Although Mark Twain famously described the Book of Mormon as

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"chloroform in print," 29 it is the "Isaiah chapters" of the Nephite record—quite similar to the corresponding portions of the Bible—that present the most formidable obstacle to many readers of the book. Isaiah Plain and Simple attempts to lessen the difficulties.

Lynn F. Price, Every Person in the Book of Mormon: A Chronological Reference and Synopsis—This is a handy and helpful aid for students of the Book of Mormon.

I wish to express my gratitude to the reviewers for their efforts in evaluating the materials that we have asked them to examine. Shirley S. Ricks and Alison V. P. Coutts prepared the reviews for publication. Melvin J. Thorne, the lead editor of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, offered useful comments and criticism. I thank each of them for their contributions.

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29 Mark Twain, Roughing It, chap. 16 (available in many editions). Twain had probably not read the Book of Mormon. See Richard H. Cracroft, "The Gentle Blasphemer: Mark Twain, Holy Scripture, and the Book of Mormon," BYU Studies 11/2 (1971): 119–40. A few weeks ago, I sat for several hours on a transcontinental flight next to a fellow who was reading (as I recall the title) The Canadian Journal of Anaesthesiology. Now that, it seems to me, could properly be termed "chloroform in print."