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## The Divine Source of the Book of Mormon in the Face of Alternative Theories Advocated by LDS Critics

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Presented at: 2001 FAIR Conference

Published by: FairMormon

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# The Divine Source of the Book of Mormon in the Face of Alternative Theories Advocated by LDS Critics



**Daniel C. Peterson**

I'm going to violate one of my most basic rules. I don't normally like to read things, but I'm going to read you something, and so, all this idea of this being fun and so on is going to be irrelevant today, it's going to be dull. If you've enjoyed the conference, my job here is to ease you into the end of the conference so it won't be so painful for you when it ends. It reminds me of a comment that Elder Holland made once, in a meeting I was in where he said that he hoped that when he died, it came in a High Priests' group meeting because the transition would be barely noticeable.

I've been working on a project, what Lou Midgley likes to call a 'secret' project. A little item that I'm trying to write and put together, and, what I've decided to do is to choose a couple of passages from the final chapter in that 'secret' project. Now you have to understand that what I'm going to be doing here, is trying to analyze evidence that I've already given in the chapter and its evidence of the kind you've already heard except I'm hoping to get it in a more concentrated dose than we typically get it.

I'm going to look at two specific issues: One is the Nature of the Dictation Process of the Book of Mormon, and the other is A Preliminary Logical Analysis of Different Hypotheses in the Production of the Book of Mormon. This is kind of a rough take, this is something that I've written this week, and so I'm hoping to get some good criticism on it and see how it works. I'll just start off reading and

commenting on it, I hope it won't be too dull, but they did leave it wide open for me largely because I refused to give them a title and so this is what they get for allowing me that latitude.

## Nature of the Dictation Process of the Book of Mormon

One of the most interesting developments in Book of Mormon studies recently is the fact that Royal Skousen's work on the manuscript history of the Book of Mormon has begun to appear, and so now the manuscripts of the Book of Mormon itself can be entered as evidence in an analysis of the book. Royal has devoted a decade and a half to intensive study of the text of the Book of Mormon, and most especially to the original and printer's manuscripts of the book.<sup>1</sup> It's his strongly considered opinion that the manuscript evidence supports the traditional account of the origin of the Book of Mormon, and that it doesn't support the notion that Joseph Smith composed the text himself or took it from any other existing manuscript. Yet all of the witnesses to the process thought that Joseph Smith somehow saw words and read them off to his scribes.<sup>2</sup> Let's look at some of the relevant data: (And this is as I say is a kind of brief summary take.)

First of all, the evidence strongly supports the traditional account in saying that the original manuscript was orally dictated. The kinds of errors that occur in the manuscript are clearly those that occur from a scribe mishearing, rather than from visually misreading while copying from another manuscript. (I can give you lots of examples of those but it would take time. I will in a written version of this eventually. The printer's manuscript, by contrast, shows precisely the types of anomalies and problems that one would expect from a copyist's errors. He's visually copying from the original manuscript into the printer's manuscript.) Professor Skousen's meticulous analysis even suggests that Joseph was working with twenty to thirty words at a time in this process.<sup>3</sup>

Now it's apparent that Joseph could see the spelling of the names on whatever it was that he was reading from.<sup>4</sup> When the scribe had written the text, he or she would inevitably read it back to Joseph for correction.<sup>5</sup> So he probably had something with him from which he evidently was dictating, and against which he could check what his scribes had written. But what was it? The witnesses unanimously agree that he did not have any books or papers with him during the translation process, which involved lengthy periods of dictation.<sup>6</sup> In an interview with her son not long before she died, Emma Smith insisted that Joseph had no text with him during the work of translation:

Q: Had he not a book or manuscript from which he read, or dictated to you?

A. He had neither manuscript nor book to read from.

Q. Could he not have had, and you not know it?

A. If he had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me.

Emma Smith could speak authoritatively regarding the period during which she herself served as a scribe. What about the much longer period when Oliver Cowdery was taking dictation? While they were in Harmony, Pennsylvania—where most of the Book of Mormon text was committed to writing—Emma says that Joseph and Oliver were not far away from her:

Q. Where did father and Oliver Cowdery write?

A. Oliver Cowdery and your father wrote in the room where I was at work.<sup>7</sup>

A correspondent from the *Chicago Times* interviewed David Whitmer on 14 October 1881 with the same story:

Mr. Whitmer emphatically asserts as did Harris and Cowdery, that while Smith was dictating the translation he had no manuscript notes or other means of knowledge save the seer stone and the characters as shown on the plates, he [that is David Whitmer] being present and cognizant how it was done.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the *St. Louis Republican* based on an interview in 1884, reported that

Father Whitmer, who was present very frequently during the writing of this manuscript [i.e., the Book of Mormon] affirms that Joseph Smith had no book or manuscript, before him from which he could have read as is asserted by some that he did, he (Whitmer) having every opportunity to know whether Smith had Salomon Spaulding's or any person's romance to read from.<sup>9</sup>

David Whitmer repeatedly insisted the translation process occurred in full view of Joseph Smith's family and associates. (The common image of a curtain hanging between the Prophet and his scribes, sometimes seen in illustrations in the story of the Book of Mormon, is based on a misunderstanding.)<sup>10</sup>

Further evidence that, whatever else was happening, Joseph Smith was not simply reading from a manuscript, comes from the *Omaha Herald*, reporting (in perhaps somewhat condescending language) an 1886 interview with David Whitmer. The newspaper's correspondent speaks that the Prophet needed to be spiritually and emotionally ready for the translation process to proceed:

This rigorous exactment required him to be humble and spotless in his deportment in order that the work might progress. On one occasion the prophet had indulged in a stormy quarrel with his wife. Without pacifying her or making any other reparation for his brutal treatment, he returned to the room in the Whitmer residence to resume the work with the plates. The surface of the magic stone remained blank, and all his persistent efforts to bring out the coveted words proved abortive. He went into the woods again to pray, and this time was gone fully an hour. His friends became positively concerned, and were about to institute a search, when Joseph entered the room, pale and haggard having suffered a vigorous chastisement at the hands of the Lord. He went straight in humiliation to his wife, entreated and received her forgiveness, returned to his work, and much to the joy of himself and his anxious friends surrounding him, the stone again glared forth its letters of fire.<sup>11</sup>

A note here, incidentally, is his propensity to retire to a grove of trees to pray when he was faced with a serious problem. It seems to me this adds plausibility to his accounts of the First Vision and there are other stories of his retiring to a grove to pray as well.

Perhaps, of course, emotional distractions interfered with Joseph Smith's ability to remember a text that he had memorized the night before for dictation to his naive secretaries, or perhaps personal upheavals distracted him from improvising an original text for them to write down what has occurred to him. (Now whether it's even remotely plausible to imagine whether Joseph Smith or anybody else memorizing or composing nearly 5,000 words daily, day after day, week after week in the production of a lengthy and complex book is a question that people can ponder for themselves.)

I might just add that I had a fairly productive period in terms of writing over the past two years, and I have kept daily records of the number of words I had written. I've averaged just over 3,000 words a week over the past two years of what I would consider publishable prose. Some of it has been published and has resulted so far in at least one very bad book and several articles, in any event, that's a fairly good level of productivity in that I'm not working at it full-time but I'm working fairly consistently at it, and in the production of the Book of Mormon is that a process that's resulting in almost 5,000 words a day for a period of just little over two months. To me that's breathtaking, that's really astonishing. Especially for a person with Joseph Smith's level of education, and people who just say, well he just had a great level of imagination gushed out of him, need to try it. Books don't gush, at least in my experience, I wish they did.

An anecdote recounted by Martin Harris to Edward Stevenson seems to argue against the translation process being either the simple dictation of a memorized text or the mechanical reading of

an ordinary manuscript being surreptitiously smuggled into the room. Harris is speaking about the earliest days of the work, before the arrival of Oliver Cowdery, when he was serving as scribe:

After continued translation, we would become weary, and would go down to the river (in Harmony, Pennsylvania by the Susquehanna) and exercise by throwing stones out on the river, etc. While so doing on one occasion, I found a stone very much resembling the one used for translating, and on resuming our labour of translation, I put in place the stone that I had found. . . The prophet remained silent, unusually and intently gazing in darkness. . . Much surprised, Joseph exclaimed “Martin what is the matter? All is as dark as Egypt!” My countenance betrayed me, and the Prophet asked me why I had done so. I said, to stop the mouths of fools, who told me that the Prophet had learned those sentences and was merely repeating them.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, it’s clear from careful analysis of the original manuscript, and I won’t go into detail here but Royal Skousen has published on this, that Joseph did not know in advance what the text was going to say. Chapter breaks and book divisions repeatedly surprised him, and had to be added as an afterthought by his scribe.<sup>13</sup> Moreover there were parts of the text that he did not understand. “When he came to proper names that he could not pronounce, or long words,” recalled his wife Emma, “he spelled them out.”<sup>14</sup> “When Joseph could not pronounce the words” agreed David Whitmer, “he spelled them out letter by letter.”<sup>15</sup> E.C. Briggs recalled an 1856 interview with Emma Smith in which “she remarked of her husband Joseph’s limited education while he was translating the Book of Mormon, and she was scribe at the time, ‘He could not pronounce the word Sariah.’ And one time while translating, where it speaks of the walls of Jerusalem, he stopped and said, ‘Emma, did Jerusalem have walls surrounding it?’ When I informed him it had, he replied, ‘O, I thought I was deceived.’”<sup>16</sup> As the *Chicago Tribune* summarized David Whitmer’s testimony in 1885, he confirmed Emma’s experience:

In translating the characters Smith, who was *illiterate* and but little versed in Biblical lore was oftentimes [*sic*] compelled to spell the words out, not knowing the correct pronunciation, and Mr. Whitmer recalls the fact that at that time Smith did not even know that Jerusalem was a walled city.<sup>17</sup>

In its notice of the death of David Whitmer, and undoubtedly based upon its prior interviews with him, the 24 January 1888 issue of the *Chicago Times* again alluded to the difficulties Joseph Smith had with the text he was dictating. “Smith being an illiterate would often stumble over the big words,

which the village schoolmaster [Oliver Cowdery] would pronounce for him, and so the work proceeded.”<sup>18</sup>

This is my summation paragraph on this particular section: Thus, we see that Joseph Smith seems to have been reading from something, but that he had no book or manuscript or paper with him. It seems to have been a text that was new and strange to him, and one that required a certain emotional or mental focus before it could be read. All of this is entirely consistent with Joseph Smith’s claim that he was deriving the text by revelation through an interpreting device, but it does not seem reconcilable with claims that he had created the text himself earlier, or even that he was reading from a purloined copy of somebody else’s manuscript. In order to make the latter theory plausible, it is necessary to reject the unanimous testimony of the eyewitnesses to the process.

Now that’s a limited conclusion but I think that it’s an important look, to be really established and sustained.

## **A Preliminary Logical Analysis of Different Hypotheses in the Production of the Book of Mormon**

Now the second part of what I want to do here is an analysis of the various hypothesis that have been offered for the production of the Book of Mormon. There seem to me to be eight basic possibilities for explaining the Book of Mormon, which fall into three general classes. I’ll summarize them first in outline form. I’ll offer comments on them then one by one.

The first general category “Subjective Explanations” which has two parts: Individual Hallucination (by Joseph Smith) and Collective Hallucination (by Joseph Smith, the Witnesses, etc.)

The second general category “Objective Reality, but Fraudulent.” This has three parts. You have the possibility of Individual Deceit (practiced by Joseph Smith unaided), then there is the possibility of Collective Deceit (by Joseph Smith, the Witnesses, etc.), and finally Collective Deceit (by Joseph Smith and some external individual or group). You could divide, I suppose, collaboration with an external group or exploitation; stealing somebody else’s manuscript barring Salomon Spaulding’s manuscript or something like that.

The third general category is “Objective Reality, with ‘Supernatural’ Explanations.” You have three possibilities there at least: The Book of Mormon is Supernatural but demonic (that’s becoming popular in certain rather odd quarters), it’s true scripture, but not ancient, and it’s simply true scripture (the traditional explanation).

Now let's see what implications these different possibilities have. At this point in what I'm writing there will be a fairly lengthy, in fact awfully lengthy, discussion of various kinds of evidences. The kind often associated with FARMS but other kinds of thing as well.

## Subjective Explanations

First in what I term the "subjective explanations." The first one in that category is Individual Hallucination (by Joseph Smith). Now this explanation seems to be virtually impossible to accept. I realize there are fairly fresh books out on the market talking about the Book of Mormon as an attempt by Joseph Smith to work out his Freudian anxieties and things like that. To me these things absolutely disappoint. There are simply too many corroborating witnesses for the Book of Mormon to be taken seriously as the product of individual hallucination. If Joseph Smith was simply fantasizing in some pathological parallel universe, it is exceedingly difficult to explain the fact that many others claim to have seen the holes in the ground, the stone receptacle, the angels, the plates, the breastplates, the Urim and Thummim, the sword of Laban, and all the other things that his wholly subjective fantasies called for. It's very odd that other people are seeing these things that don't exist.

So, we are led necessarily to another possibility: Collective Hallucination (by Joseph Smith, the Witnesses, etc.). This explanation is only slightly more plausible. It is virtually impossible to imagine a hallucination that continued over weeks, months and years, involving numerous people whose hallucinatory illusions were so coherent and congruent with one another—people who, apart from their religious views (unacceptable in principle to certain critics), can find no other reason to think them psychologically maladapted. I mean you look at someone like David Whitmer who goes on in the fifteen years he's separated from the Church to be city councilman and then mayor of Richmond, Missouri. Oliver Cowdery who leads a pretty successful life as a lawyer and so on, these people don't seem obviously mad. Moreover, many who were at the scene seem to support Joseph Smith's story occurred under wholly matter-of-fact conditions: David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery, for example, climbing onto the Hill Cumorah and seeing the stone box from which the plates were taken. Emma Smith feeling the plates through their thin muslin cloth, moving them around while she does housework. Lucy Mack Smith seeing the breastplate. The eight witnesses themselves, standing in a clearing in the woods in broad daylight leafing through the plates. William Smith estimating their weight at about 60 pounds.

Gary Habermas' comment (now there's a deliberate point in quoting Gary Habermas here, he's a very prominent evangelical apologist who has written about the resurrection of Christ quite persuasively I might say. I've had some correspondence with him about some of these issues. It will



be interesting to see how he reacts to his logic being applied to the witnesses) about Christ's appearance to the eleven apostles is precisely relevant here and worth repeating: "Hallucinations are private events observed by one person alone. Two people cannot see the same hallucination, let alone eleven." I'm fond of the fact that in both cases we're talking about eleven. I mean it's an exact parallel. In support of his position, he cites personal correspondence from someone he describes as a "well-published psychologist" who writes

Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. They certainly are not something which can be seen by a group of people. Neither is it possible that one person could somehow induce an hallucination in somebody else. Since an hallucination exists only in the subjective, personal sense, it is obvious that others cannot witness it.<sup>19</sup>

And then I quote a Catholic apologist (again there's method in this.) He begins talking about the resurrection. He says: "Hallucination is a solitary phenomenon", Carl Keating speaking, "In medical literature, there are no records of even two people having the same hallucination at the same time."<sup>20</sup> This really defangs a certain response to the Book of Mormon.

A passage from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is apropos here. Theseus, the Duke of Athens, and his bride-to-be Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, have just heard the tale told by the lovers Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius, of strange transformations and fairies in the woods. Hippolyta is impressed and puzzled by the story: "'Tis strange my Theseus, that these lovers speak of." And he responds: "More strange than true".

This is the Book of Mormon critic:

"More strange than true, I never may believe  
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys. . ."

and she responds:

"But all the story of the night told over,  
And all their minds transfigured so together,  
More witnesseth than fancy's images  
And grows to something of great constancy."<sup>21</sup>

Now *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is obviously fiction, and of the most fantastic kind. Still, within the framework of the play we know that the lover's story is entirely true, and that Oberon, Titania, Puck, and the others were in fact active realities. Hippolyta's point is an entirely sound one. The consistency of the tale told by various witnesses indicates that it rests upon more than mere imagination.

## Objective Reality, but Fraudulent

It seems apparent, therefore, that we're obliged to assume there was *something*, some objective reality, at the basis of the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. We'll first look at various explanations holding that, yes, there was an objective reality but it was an artifact of fraud.

First, there is the concept of Individual Deceit (practiced by Joseph Smith, unaided). It seems difficult to credit this as a believable explanation for the Book of Mormon. We've seen the evidence (you would have if you had read what I've written which isn't finished) there is evidence anyway of Joseph Smith's sincerity and good character, which makes it difficult to imagine that he would be party to such deceit. Of course, there is one theory that Joseph was a "*pious* fraud," lying for Jesus, concocting a tale with which to resist the then-popular heresy of Deism. Whether even such a notion is compatible with the many testimonies of his honesty and character is dubious, in my view. But entirely aside from the perhaps ultimately unresolvable question of his innermost character, Joseph Smith seems positively *incapable* of having pulled off such an enterprise on his own, unaided. He was, as those who knew him best readily and repeatedly noted, only marginally literate during the period of the production of the Book of Mormon.

Certainly he seems an unlikely candidate to have produced a book manifesting all of the apparently authentic ancient and Near Eastern characteristics that the book quite arguably possesses. Though there is, as we have seen, quite persuasive evidence that he was unfamiliar with the text as he translated it, and that he struggled with its proper names and some of its vocabulary. Furthermore, could he have written something so sophisticated and complex in so short a time? Could he have fabricated gold plates? Where did he derive the metallurgical expertise? Where did he get the gold? (Just now gold is selling for about \$275 an ounce. If William Smith's estimate of the plates weight at 60 pounds was accurate, and if they were pure gold, their monetary value in today's terms was something on the order of \$264,000. More likely, they were gold alloy, but, clearly their value was far beyond the reach of a young son of a subsistence farmer.)

Where did the gold go when he was done with it? Did he just give it away? Bury it? How was he able to produce the breastplate and other artifacts that they saw? Was he really up on the Hill Cumorah cementing a box and hiding it in the earth? Why did nobody notice any of this elaborate activity? Finally, it is very difficult to see how he convinced many of his associates to believe that they were seeing angels, experiencing miracles, hearing the voice of God and witnessing examples of otherwise impossible prophetic foreknowledge. For lack of a better word, such “supernatural” aspects of the story are exceptionally difficult to account for on a hypothesis of simple fraud.

It might possibly be suggested, of course, that Joseph Smith profited from the happy coincidence that his fraudulence was supported by a gang of gullible allegiants who saw visions on command and then, independently, all endorsing his story. The improbabilities seem too high. The principle of “Ockham’s Razor,” attributed to the medieval philosopher William of Ockham, has become an important principle in the construction and evaluation of scientific hypotheses. It advises scientists and scholars not to multiply “entities” beyond what is necessary to explain the data at hand. That is, if a lunar eclipse can be fully explained by understanding the position of the sun, the earth, and the moon, there’s no need to bring in any additional notions (such as, for example a hungry moon-eating dragon) to explain the phenomenon. The “Razor” also warns scientists and others against rickety structures of conjecture that simply become too complicated to be taken seriously. “Simplicity” and “elegance” are increasingly recognized as important principles in the construction of scientific theories. (An odd fact, incidentally, on the atheistic supposition of a random purposeless universe.)

The Ptolemaic view of the solar system, for example, finally collapsed under the weight of all the cycles and epicycles that had to be invoked to explain the observed astronomical data. When Copernicus and Kepler showed that the same data could be explained by means of a relatively simple and logically elegant alternative model, Ptolemaic astronomy was dead. Similarly, it seems, composite theories that purport to explain the Book of Mormon on the basis of fortuitous culminations of inconceivable cunning, superhuman talent, bottomless credulity, and successful well-balanced lunatics, is ultimately too cumbersome to be plausible.

Accordingly, we are obliged to look at the suggestion that the Book of Mormon was the product not of *simple* fraud, perpetrated by one fiendishly, peerlessly clever individual, but of *collective* fraud. First, we look at the notion of “Collective Deceit (by Joseph Smith, the Witnesses, etc.)” This hypothesis would account for the “supernatural” elements of the story of the emergence of the Book of Mormon, in that it would simply allege that such things never happened. But it, too, every bit as much as the idea of individual deception, collides with the evidence (that I have presented in other writing not yet published) respecting the character of Joseph Smith. Moreover, it clashes directly with

the evidence we have concerning the character of the Witnesses and the others and their subsequent behavior. One of the things most frequently noted by those who interviewed David Whitmer in the last decades of his life is the reverence and awe with which he regarded the manuscript of the Book of Mormon that he had in his possession. He refused to part with it for any sum of money, though he was by no means wealthy, and both he and his family felt not only that it was divinely protected but that they would share in that divine protection so long as they owned it.<sup>22</sup>

Whether their sense of the manuscript's near supernatural potency be viewed as misplaced or not is irrelevant to the issue at hand: Such attitudes are impossible to square with cynicism and conscious deception. There is simply no sign of dishonesty or a conspiracy among Joseph Smith's associates—and, in the case of a group so large (eleven official witnesses, plus Mary Whitmer and Emma Smith and Lucy Mack Smith and William Smith and others), it would be inconceivably difficult to keep such a conspiracy under wraps. Particularly so, as the alleged conspirators suffered much (including death, in a few cases) for their supposed plot, gained nothing, were (in many cases) alienated from Joseph Smith, and, collectively, lived several decades after the death of the Prophet and entirely isolated from any supportive or ego-gratifying community. As the lawyer James H. Moyle justly observed, after interviewing David Whitmer at length and applying to him all his cross-examining skills, "If there had been fraud in this matter Joseph Smith would have cultivated those men and kept them with him at any cost. The truth is that when they became unworthy they were excommunicated, even though they were witnesses to the Book of Mormon."<sup>23</sup> In a 22 September 1899 letter, David Whitmer's grandson, George Schweich, recalled of his grandfather,

I have begged him to unfold the fraud in the case and he had all to gain and nothing to lose but to speak the word if he thought so—but he has described the scene to me many times, of his vision about noon in an open pasture—there is only one explanation barring an actual miracle and that is this—If that vision was not real it was HYPNOTISM, it was real to grandfather IN FACT.<sup>24</sup>

But, as we have seen, hallucination, whether individual or collective, seems incapable of explaining the facts connected with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Still, even if a conspiracy involving Joseph Smith, the Witnesses, and his family and other close associates seems highly unlikely, it may still be the case that other conspirators, wholly or largely invisible in the story, may have collaborated with and worked through Joseph Smith to deceive his family, his friends, and the world, or, at least, that other people may even innocently have provided

Joseph Smith with what he needed in order to practice his deceptions. So we come to what I have termed “Collective Deceit (by Joseph Smith and some external individual or group).”

There are two fundamental possibilities here. In the first scenario, an individual co-conspirator or a group of co-conspirators, more learned and sophisticated than Joseph Smith, actually wrote the Book of Mormon and, in some fashion or other, helped him persuade his gullible kinfolk and friends that angels were visiting them, God was speaking to them, and the like. (How they might have accomplished this, long before the heyday of special effects, is somewhat mysterious.) Perhaps this conspiracy also fabricated the plates, created the Urim and Thummim, constructed the stone box and buried it in the hill, made the breastplate, and furnished the other necessary objects. But do we have any actual evidence for the existence of such a person or persons? Who, specifically, were they? I asked this question of a person advocating this theory just yesterday, or the day before, and he answered that he didn’t know and probably never would know. I think that’s some liability for the theory. What were their motives? What did they have to gain? Certainly they never made any money. Nor, clearly, did they gain notoriety. We don’t even know who they were or even if they were. Why did they remain silent? It is difficult to disprove the existence of silent, invisible conspirators, just as it is difficult to disprove the existence of an invisible giant rabbit. But the hypothesis seems unlikely.

However, the second scenario may provide a solution to the problem. Perhaps the “co-conspirators” were unaware of Joseph Smith’s appropriation of their literary work. Perhaps the actual author or authors of the Book of Mormon were actually dead. Here, too, though, serious doubts intervene. With all the notoriety that Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon gained, it is hard to imagine that the actual author or authors of the book, if they were still living, would not have stepped forward to put an end to the charade and to claim credit of authorship. And, in any case, witnesses to the translation process are insistent, as I’ve said, that Joseph Smith *did not* bring a manuscript with him and was *not* reading from an already written text. This fact seems to work against either form of the “external conspiracy” hypothesis. Moreover, the various authentically ancient and Near Eastern elements of the book are still unaccounted for by either hypothesis. And, finally, it is simply hard to imagine how the process might have worked: The grammar and vocabulary of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon plainly represents nonstandard English of the kind that would be expected from a person of Joseph Smith’s class and educational background in the early nineteenth century. If another individual or group of individuals, more learned, educated, and urbane, actually wrote the Book of Mormon, we have to assume that it was composed in something much more like the standard literary English of the early nineteenth century than what we actually see in the original manuscript. Or, alternatively, that a learned person deliberately composed it in uneducated frontier dialect. If the latter hypothesis is unacceptable, we can only guess that Joseph or someone like him took an originally

standard English document and laboriously rewrote the whole thing in substandard language, perhaps in an effort to disguise its origins among the classically educated people of Dartmouth or the sophisticates of Philadelphia. Moreover, if the unwitting co-conspirator was dead or otherwise unaware of Joseph Smith's devious game, that would thrust back onto Joseph the production of all the props and "special effects" needed to create the confirmatory aura of "supernaturalism" surrounding the emergence of the Book of Mormon.

## Objective Reality, with "Supernatural" Explanations

I see problems with all of these hypotheses. Thus far, we have been discussing hypotheses that might, at least transiently, be considered by anyone contemplating the puzzle of the Book of Mormon. Now, however, we leave atheists and naturalists behind and approach a realm that only those willing to entertain the possibility of what might be termed, somewhat problematically, "supernatural" power can enter.

The first circle of this realm is the one I have called "Supernatural but demonic." Those who recognize that no naturalistic hypothesis can account for the historical data regarding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, or for its seemingly strong links to antiquity and the Near East, but who still do not wish to take it as an authoritative spiritual guide, have this one last fall-back position. They can concede virtually every argument advanced by advocates of the Book of Mormon, but neutralize the Latter-day Saint case by noting that "Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light."<sup>25</sup> In their support, they can cite the very words of Jesus regarding the last days: "Impostors will come claiming to be messiahs or prophets, and they will produce great signs and wonders to mislead even God's chosen, if such a thing were possible."<sup>26</sup>

Such an argument is difficult to deal with. It is perhaps fair to point out that such people themselves might be among those deceived. They should not discount that possibility. We are all fallible. But it is also fair to ask whether God is the kind of being who would allow people like the Smiths and the Whitmers and the Cowderys and Martin Harris and others, who, the historical data clearly indicate, were sincerely and prayerfully seeking him, to be led astray to perdition. If so, how can we trust Him in anything? How can any answer to prayer or understanding of scripture be relied upon?

In the last analysis, though, advocates of the Book of Mormon must simply point to the test suggested by Jesus himself: "Beware of false prophets," He said, "men who come to you dressed up as sheep while underneath they are savage wolves." But He did not say, as he surely could have, that

all claimants to prophecy after his day would be marked by that very claim as false pretenders. That would have been simple: A person claims to be a prophet, he's not. Instead, he said,

You will recognize them by the fruits they bear. Can grapes be picked from briars, or figs from thistles? In the same way, a good tree always yields good fruit, and a poor tree bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, or a poor tree good fruit.<sup>27</sup>

Advocates of the Book of Mormon can perhaps be pardoned for maintaining that the fruit of the Book of Mormon, in changed lives, in hardships overcome, deserts tamed, and other regards, has been good, indeed remarkable. Those considering this issue will have to determine for themselves whether the doctrine, and the life led by those who accept it, tastes good. And, as the Latin saying goes, there is no disputing about taste.

The next possibility in the “supernatural category,” which I have called “True scripture, but not ancient,” seems, in principle, a little easier to deal with. According to this hypothesis, the Book of Mormon is true and authoritative scripture, but is not historically factual. That is, there were no real Nephites, Jaredites, and Lamanites. There was no real Lehi colony. Jesus did not really visit the Americas following his ascension in Palestine. The truths of the Book of Mormon on this understanding are purely doctrinal, or even poetic, set, for some reason, in a framework of narrative fiction. Or perhaps the Book of Mormon should be compared to the parables of Jesus, which teach important principles although they are clearly not intended as literal history. Nobody asks to know the real name of the Prodigal Son and his father, or the identity of their home village. It would be foolish to inquire after the name of the Good Samaritan or his patient.

Such a view obviously ascribes a certain value to the Book of Mormon. But it essentially neutralizes the value of the book as a second witness for Christ. For, if Christ did not really appear to real Nephites, it is less than obvious that the Book of Mormon constitutes independent evidence for His divinity, His atonement, and His resurrection. Still, the fundamental problem with this notion is that it seems to involve God in purposeless deceit. For the fabrication of the plates and the breastplate and the Urim and Thummim and the stone box seems to serve little purpose other than to witness to the existence of a real ancient civilization that really created the text and whose history is really represented in its stories. And who, on this understanding, was Moroni, really? Why masquerade as an ancient Nephite, if there were none such? Couldn't theological truths have been revealed in some other way, even in some other way attended by spectacular displays of “supernatural” power and glory, unaccompanied by misleading historical falsehoods? The Doctrine and Covenants was revealed without any mythical ancient history surrounding it. For, when all is said and done, the complex story

in the Book of Mormon, with its genealogies and descriptions of battles and the like, turns out on this hypothesis to be nothing more than a lie. The parables were never intended to be taken as history. The Book of Mormon clearly was and is.

We are left with the last possibility—the one that, to nobody’s surprise, I find preferable and most likely. This is the idea that the Book of Mormon, as the traditional story has always insisted, is “True scripture,” and historically authentic. All of the evidence presented to this point is consistent with the hypothesis that the Book of Mormon is true, historically authentic scripture. Indeed, in my view, some of the evidence presented here virtually demands such a verdict.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the results of his labors thus far, see *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text*, edited by Royal Skousen (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001) and *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts*, edited by Royal Skousen (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> See *Translating the Book of Mormon*, 61-93. An abridged form of the same article has been published as Royal Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 22-31. Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, is replete with testimony to this effect.

<sup>3</sup> *Translating the Book of Mormon*, 67-75; Skousen, *How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Translating the Book of Mormon*, 75-82; Skousen, *How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon*, 27.

<sup>5</sup> *Translating the Book of Mormon*, 82-84; Skousen, *How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> See *Translating the Book of Mormon*, 62; Skousen, *How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Advocate* 1/4 (October 1879): 50-52; *Saints' Herald* 26/19 (1 October 1879): 290.

<sup>8</sup> *Chicago Times* (17 October 1881), as given in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 76. Compare Whitmer's reply to J.W. Chatburn, as reported in *The Saints' Herald* 29 (15 June 1882), and reproduced in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 92.

<sup>9</sup> *St. Louis Republican* (16 July 1884), as given in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 139-140.

<sup>10</sup> See his comments to the *Chicago Tribune* (17 December 1885), as also the summary of an interview with him given in a February 1870 letter from William E. McLellan to some unidentified "dear friends" and the report published in the *Chicago Times* (24 January 1888). The relevant passages are conveniently available in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 173, 233-234, 249.

<sup>11</sup> *Omaha Herald* (17 October 1886), as reprinted in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 199. Whitmer told the same story to William H. Kelley and G.A. Blakeslee on 15 January 1882. See Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 86.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Stevenson, "Incidents in the Life of Martin Harris," *Millennial Star* 44 (6 February 1882): 86-87. [See original.]

<sup>13</sup> *Translating the Book of Mormon*, 85-86; Skousen, *How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon*, 27-28.

<sup>14</sup> Edmund C. Briggs, "A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856," *Journal of History* 9 (January 1916): 454. [See original.]

<sup>15</sup> Said in a 25 April 1884 interview with E.C. Briggs and Rudolph Etzenhouser, as given in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 128.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Lyndon Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 126-127.

<sup>17</sup> *Chicago Tribune* (17 December 1885), as given in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 174. Emphasis in the original. Whitmer also mentioned the walls-of-Jerusalem incident in a conversation with the non-Mormon M. J. Hubble, on 13 November 1886. See Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 211.

<sup>18</sup> *Chicago Times* (24 January 1888), as reproduced in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 249.

<sup>19</sup> Gary R. Habermas and Antony G.N. Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 50. The "well-published psychologist" is Gary R. Collins, cited from personal correspondence with Gary R. Habermas, dated 21 February 1977. See also J.P. Brady, "The Veridicality of Hypnotic, Visual Hallucinations," in Wolfram Keup, *Origin and Mechanisms of Hallucinations* (New York: Plenum Press, 1970), 181; Weston La Barre, "Anthropological Perspectives on Hallucination and Hallucinogens," in *Hallucinations: Behavior, Experience and Theory* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975), 9-10.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Keating, *What Catholics Really Believe*, 73-74.

<sup>21</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.1-4, 23-26.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 28-29, 30, 43-44, 45, 47, 69-70, 78, 96, 99, 107, 108, 126, 130-131, 136, 140, 144, 149-150, 160-161, 164, 170, 177, 196, 231, 239, 252. (For an important clarification of David Whitmer's testimony, however, note Joseph F. Smith's remarks on pages 257-258.)

<sup>23</sup> As cited in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 169.

<sup>24</sup> Given in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 255-256 (emphases in original).

<sup>25</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:14 (NEB).

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 24:24 (NEB).

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 7:15-18 (NEB).