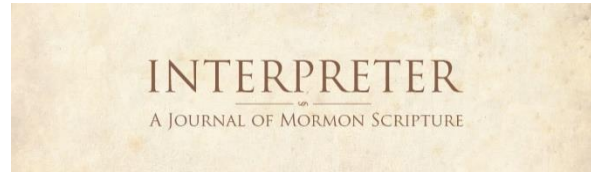




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The Imperative for a Historical Book of Mormon

Author(s): Stephen O. Smoot

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Abstract: The Book of Mormon does not proclaim itself to be fiction. It uncompromisingly proclaims itself, and its message about Christ, to be historical fact. Although fiction about Jesus, including a hypothetically fictional Book of Mormon, may indeed be “inspiring” in a limited literary sense, such is not necessarily the same as it being inspired in a divine sense.

As Joseph Smith declared, “Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations and where is our religion? We have none.”



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THE IMPERATIVE FOR A HISTORICAL BOOK OF MORMON

Stephen O. Smoot

The Book of Mormon must be read as an ancient, not as a modern book. Its mission, as described by the book itself, depends in great measure for its efficacy on its genuine antiquity.

—Hugh Nibley¹

To many non-Mormon readers, the Book of Mormon's insistence on its historicity is troublesome. Modern scholars are quite comfortable in safely dotting over quaint and long-forgotten religious texts that are considered neither genuinely historical nor scriptural by modern believers. The Book of Mormon, by contrast, claims to be "an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites . . . [and] an abridgment of the Book of Ether," that was "written by way of commandment, and also by the spirit of prophecy and of revelation" (Book of Mormon Title Page). This has created an extremely awkward situation for religious historians who, in the words of Terryl Givens, "want to salvage Joseph Smith's prophetic role . . . by avoiding what they see as the embarrassing ramifications of his naked prose or the fragility of the book's historical claims." This awkwardness makes these uncomfortable historians "hard-pressed to devise nonliteral readings" of the Book of Mormon. Why so? "Joseph's prophetic writings [are] grounded in artifactual reality, not the world of psychic meanderings. It is hard to allegorize—and profoundly presumptuous to edit down—a sacred record that purports to be a transcription of tangible records hand-delivered by an angel."²

Converging with the sentiments of Terryl Givens above is Richard Bushman, who in 1984 drew a similar conclusion for LDS scripture:

The greatest error would be to mistake these narratives from ancient times as mere objects of curiosity, revealing a Mormon taste with the mysteries of antiquity. . . . Joseph Smith's revelations . . . made new sacred narratives that were themselves the foundation for belief. . . . The Book of Mormon throughout is composed of happenings wherein God directed, reprov'd, punished, and redeemed his people. What distinguished Mormonism was not so much the gospel Mormons taught . . . but what they believed had happened—to Joseph Smith, to Book of Mormon characters, and to Moses and Enoch. . . . The core of Mormon belief was a conviction about actual

events. . . . Mormonism was history, not philosophy. . . . The strength of the church, the vigor of the Mormon missionary movement, and the staying power of the Latter-day Saints from 1830 to the present rest on the belief in the reality of these events.³

This observation is true for the events narrated in the Book of Mormon, and also of the foundational stories of the Restoration. As Louis Midgley has often reminded us, it is not theology, philosophy, or creeds that primarily distinguishes Mormonism from other Christian denominations.⁴ Parallels between Mormon theology and both ancient and contemporary Christian and Jewish theologies can easily be drawn.⁵ Rather, it is its claim of being a continuation of ancient covenantal history and a restoration of biblical, patriarchal religion by the ministry of angels that has invigorated Mormonism (see for example Doctrine & Covenants 110; 128:20–23) and has set it apart from the myriad Christian denominations scattered throughout the globe today.

Grant Hardy, in his recent treatment on the Book of Mormon, agrees both with Givens and Bushman in emphasizing the significance of the historical claims of the Book of Mormon. Although he approaches the Book of Mormon from a literary perspective, and brackets the question of the book's historicity in his study for the sake of maintaining the aim of his literary analysis (a perfectly legitimate and fruitful undertaking so long as one acknowledges from the start what one is doing, and thereby does not allow a literary analysis to overshadow its doctrine or historical claims), he nevertheless sums up perfectly the predicament faced by any reader of the book.

Joseph and his associates insisted from the beginning that the Book of Mormon was a translation from an authentic ancient document written in "Reformed Egyptian" on metal plates and buried by the last ancient author about AD 421. . . . The strong historical assertions of the book seem to allow for only three possible origins: as a miraculously translated historical document, as a fraud (perhaps a pious one) written by Joseph Smith, or as a delusion (perhaps sincerely believed) that originated in Smith's subconscious.⁶

Paul Hoskisson points to another specific reason for insisting on the importance of the historicity of the Book of Mormon (as well as other scripture):

If God expects us in the time and space of this world to submit to ordinances and other physical requirements, then the scriptural passages which exemplify and instruct us concerning those actions must be historical.⁷

These and similar observations, as well as a careful look at the statements made by Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon itself, have lead me to the following conclusion: the historicity of the Book of Mormon is an imperative for Mormonism. The book not only must be read as history, but also must actually be history for it to carry meaningful theological legitimacy—that is, a real meaning for the faithful Latter-day Saint.

The “Inspired Fiction” Theory of the Book of Mormon

In response to what they see as overwhelming evidence against the Book of Mormon’s historical authenticity, but in a wish to maintain that the book might still be “inspiring,” a number of readers have composed a theory that the Book of Mormon may not be historical, but is yet somehow still “inspired” or even in some sense “revelatory.” For the sake of convenience, I will call this the “Inspired Fiction” theory of the Book of Mormon.

Inspired Fiction?

One proponent of the Inspired Fiction theory is Anthony A. Hutchinson.⁸ Hutchinson begins with a plea:

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints should confess in faith that the Book of Mormon is the word of God but also abandon claims that it is a historical record of the ancient peoples of the Americas. We should accept that it is a work of scripture inspired by God in the same way that the Bible is inspired, but one that has as its human author Joseph Smith, Jr.⁹

What follows is Hutchinson’s rationalization for this credo. For Hutchinson, there can be no question that the Book of Mormon is not a genuine historical text. He dismisses the work of Hugh Nibley, John Sorenson, and other LDS scholars, and sighs with resignation that he cannot see any redeeming argument for the Book of Mormon’s historicity.¹⁰ He likewise voices his suspicion concerning the literalness of the accounts given by Joseph Smith and his closest associates (such as the Three and Eight Witnesses) of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.¹¹

Given what he sees is the unimpressive evidence for its historicity and the “visionary character”¹² of Joseph Smith’s account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, Hutchinson rejects the historicity of the Book of Mormon *in toto*. There were no real Nephites, golden plates, or angels outside of the fruitful imagination of an impressionable young Joseph Smith. But despite his insistence on the Book of Mormon’s unhistorical nature, in 1993 Hutchinson did not feel it necessary to totally abandon the book’s spiritual power: “I believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God because I am moved by its story and the story of its author, Joseph Smith the prophet, and the story of people brought together by its coming forth.”¹³ All that is therefore needed to accept the Book of Mormon as scripture is to confess faith in a compelling story, regardless of whether that story actually ever really happened.

Hutchinson is by no means alone in promulgating the Inspired Fiction theory. Robert M. Price picks up this line of thought in an essay that implores the reader to view Joseph Smith as the “inspired author” of the Book of Mormon.¹⁴ “If Joseph Smith is to be considered not the excavator and translator but the author of the Book of Mormon,” Price reasons, “the situation is far removed from that of some crude hoax or practical joke.”¹⁵

As with Hutchinson, Price operates with the a priori assumption of a non-historical Book of Mormon. But the non-historicity of the Book of Mormon doesn’t matter to Price, who feels it entirely proper to count the Book of Mormon as “scriptural” and Joseph Smith as “inspired” for no other reason than the noble intentions behind the entire scheme.

Joseph Smith, disillusioned by the strife and confusion of rival Christian sects, each of which claimed the authority of the Bible for its distinctive teachings, finally decided to cut the Gordian Knot of Bible exegesis by creating a new scripture that would undercut the debating of the denominations and render them superfluous.¹⁶

Far from the conniving charlatan of the anti-Mormon polemics of yore, Joseph Smith, in this re-envisioning, was acting out of pure intentions. He meant well in fabricating new scripture, and, as such, can only be lauded. What’s more, the fact that Joseph Smith took the Bible as his prime source for fabricating new scripture only further shows his holy intentions.

Smith's apparent, fundamental source material still survives: the Bible. Like the Gospel writers . . . Joseph Smith seems to have created new holy fictions by running the old ones through the shredder and reassembling the shreds in wholly new combinations. His method appears to be precisely that of the old rabbis and of the New Testament evangelists. So, not only did Smith do the same sort of thing biblical writers themselves did to produce new Bible text, he even did it the same way.¹⁷

Price feels no constraint in rhapsodizing with gushing effusion on the Book of Mormon as "inspired" pseudepigrapha and Joseph Smith as its "inspired" author. This, Price insists, frees us from the discomfiture inherent in an obviously unhistorical Book of Mormon being held up as historical by decades of Mormon dogma, and opens up new vistas of scriptural exploration. Now the Book of Mormon can be read the way it was meant to be read all along: as non-literal, unhistorical, and fictitious.

Then there is Scott Dunn, who makes a case for the Book of Mormon as "automatic writing." In this scenario, we are to understand Joseph Smith as psychotic: one who is psychologically detached from reality, but still somehow in communication with divinity.¹⁸ Accordingly, "God use[d] automatic writing to help his prophets produce latter-day scripture."¹⁹

If we see the Book of Mormon as the result of Joseph Smith's psychosis, Dunn argues, then we can safely put it next to other wondrous books that were likewise purportedly the result, at least to some extent, of automatic dictation, including *A Course in Miracles* by Helen Cohn Schucman, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *Jerusalem* by William Blake. (What a flattering compliment to have Joseph Smith included in the pantheon of western authors next to one of the Brontë sisters and Blake!)

But what, exactly, leads Dunn to conclude that Joseph Smith was psychotic, and that the Book of Mormon is a product of something called automatic dictation? Nothing less than a commanding "number of parallels . . . between Joseph Smith's production of scripture and instances of automatic writing."²⁰ These parallels include

multiple authorship, use of archaic language, accounts of bygone historical figures, accurate descriptions of times and places apparently unfamiliar to the writer, narratives with well-developed characters and plot, accounts of various ministries of Jesus Christ, poetics, occasionally impressive literary

quality, doctrinal, theological, and cosmological discussions, and even discourses by deity.²¹

Equally telling for Dunn is the manner in which Joseph Smith created the Book of Mormon. In a trance-like state Joseph Smith dictated page after page of text without referencing notes or making corrections. The breathtakingly fast pace of the flawless dictation and Joseph Smith's use of a "crystal or stone"²² in his dictation are unmistakable characteristics of "automatic dictation," according to Dunn. With this in mind, Dunn safely concludes that "automatic writing . . . provides a simple explanation of these circumstances."²³

But, as with Hutchinson and Price, Dunn believes his theory renders moot the question of the Book of Mormon's contested origins. This is because Dunn believes "automatic writing" can account for things such as "Smith's scriptural productions repeating things he may have heard or overheard in conversation, camp meetings, or other [19th century] settings without any concerted study of the issues," as well as the assertion by apologists "that Smith was too ignorant and uneducated to create a book of such complex construction and profound teachings."²⁴

In other words, there is no need to debate whether Joseph Smith pilfered from *View of the Hebrews* (a favorite candidate of Joseph Smith's alleged plagiarism for those seeking a naturalistic explanation for the origins of the Book of Mormon) or had at his disposal a copy of the Bible during the production of the Book of Mormon, since "automatic writing" somehow allows the author to unconsciously "channel" previously retained information. Nor is it necessary to argue for the Book of Mormon's complexity or ancient authenticity, since "automatic writing" has also allegedly produced works that exhibit complexity and marks of antiquity. Dunn observes that "some apologists have claimed that evidence for the Book of Mormon's ancient character 'proves' or validates its doctrinal teachings." "Such claims," he continues,

are clearly made in ignorance of automatic texts, many of which evidence historical and philosophical knowledge beyond that of the writer. Since the theologies of these other writings clash with the Book of Mormon and with each other, it is fallacious to suggest a connection between doctrinal claims of a book and the miraculous aspects of its contents.²⁵

So we need to stop fretting over the historicity of the Book of Mormon, or whether it has 19th century or ancient characteristics. What matters is solely the “inspiration” of the book, which, like other works written under similar circumstances, was produced through the “inspiration” of “automatic writing.”

After surveying these arguments, the commonalities between these and other manifestations of the Inspired Fiction reading of the Book of Mormon become readily apparent. First, in each recasting of this theory, Joseph Smith was never in the possession of real gold plates, or real interpreters (aka the Urim and Thummim), or a real sword of Laban, or a real breastplate. These artifacts, presumably, were either faked/fabricated or imagined. Second, nothing in the Book of Mormon corresponds to historical reality. Nephites, Lamanites, Zarahemla, Bountiful, Lehi, Nephi, Helaman, Moroni, etc., never existed outside the pages of Joseph Smith’s novel. Third, the historicity of the Book of Mormon is irrelevant with regard to whether the book is “inspired.” Scripture does not need to be historically real to be from God.

The Flaws of an Inspired Fiction Reading of the Book of Mormon

No matter how ingenious, or sympathetic, these attempts to deny the Book of Mormon’s historicity and yet maintain its “inspiration” may be, they simply don’t work. The logical flaws in any Inspired Fiction reading of the Book of Mormon are not only too numerous and fail to account for the historical evidence concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, but also grotesquely deform the Book of Mormon into something neither it nor its millions of faithful adherents ever claimed it to be. “For a variety of reasons,” Givens succinctly explains, “such efforts [to read the Book of Mormon as inspired fiction] may be well intentioned, but they are untenable.”²⁶

The first of the variety of reasons why the Inspired Fiction theory is untenable is that it begs the question of the Book of Mormon’s non-historical nature. In other words, proponents of the Inspired Fiction theory must first assume that the Book of Mormon is not historical before they can proceed any further; which assumption is far from certain and highly debatable. If the work of Mormon scholars in the past 50 years has proven anything, it is that a rigorous defense of the Book of Mormon’s historicity can and has been made in such a compelling manner that one must confront this body of scholarship and adequately account for it before one can propose any Inspired Fiction reading.

This is, however, precisely what proponents of the Inspired Fiction theory have *not* done. They have not adequately responded to the work of Mormon scholars on behalf of the Book of Mormon's historicity. With few exceptions, they have merely assumed or uncritically accepted the conclusion that the Book of Mormon is not historical. This conclusion has not only been vigorously challenged by many scholars, but has also not been adequately sustained by those advocating the non-historical nature of the Book of Mormon. The Inspired Fiction theory, therefore, is little more than a refuge for those who have merely assumed that the Book of Mormon cannot possibly be an authentic ancient text.

William Hamblin has succinctly summarized an even more problematic logical inconsistency in the Inspired Fiction theory.

1. Joseph Smith claimed to have had possession of golden plates written by the Nephites, and to have been visited by Moroni, a resurrected Nephite.
2. If the Book of Mormon is not an ancient document, there were no Nephites.
3. If there were no Nephites, there were no golden plates written by Nephites; and there was no Nephite named Moroni.
4. If there was no Moroni and no golden plates, then Joseph did not tell the truth when he claimed to possess and translate these nonexistent plates, and to have been visited by a resurrected man.
5. Hence, Joseph was either lying (he knew there were no plates or angelic visitations, but was trying to convince others that there were), or he was insane or deluded (he believed there were golden plates and angelic visitations which in fact did not exist).²⁷

The case against the Inspired Fiction theory can be elucidated with this simple question, which proponents of the Inspired Fiction theory must answer: if the Book of Mormon isn't historical, then was Joseph Smith a deliberate liar when he said he had golden plates, and was visited by an ancient Nephite prophet, or was he merely delusional? Or was he perhaps a sincere liar, in that he came to believe in his own delusions? To these interrogatories a follow-up question may be asked: why would God choose a liar or a lunatic to bring about the Restoration? As Hamblin remarks,

If [those who read the Book of Mormon as inspired fiction] wish to maintain that the Book of Mormon is not an ancient document, but that Joseph Smith was somehow still a prophet, they must present some cogent explanation

for Joseph's wild claims of possessing nonexistent golden plates and being visited by nonexistent angels.²⁸

What's more, as Kent Jackson, who puts an even finer point on this question, explains,

relegating the Book of Mormon to inspired parable or morally uplifting allegory presents serious problems of logic. The book itself announces its historicity repeatedly. Can it really be true in any sense if it consistently misrepresents its origin? Joseph Smith also was consistent in maintaining that the book describes real events and real people. . . . Can these sources be relied on for anything if they unfailingly misrepresent the nature of the "keystone" of the Latter-day Saint faith?²⁹

Joseph Smith's insistence on the historicity of the Book of Mormon was constant throughout his ministry. To ignore this fact is to unjustifiably wink at a crucial piece of evidence in assessing the nature of the Book of Mormon and how the Latter-day Saints have viewed it since 1830. The well-documented statements of Joseph Smith consistently affirming the Book of Mormon as historical must be dealt with by the proponents of the Inspired Fiction theory.³⁰

Even if we grant that Joseph Smith was the author, even the "inspired author" of the Book of Mormon, we must still ask why he would perpetuate falsehoods throughout his life concerning the coming forth and historicity of the Book of Mormon. Why would he keep up the ruse if he knew he was the author and not the prophetic translator of the Book of Mormon? Or perhaps, as mentioned above, Joseph Smith came to believe his own delusions. This is essentially what Fawn Brodie and Dan Vogel have argued in their biographies of the Prophet.³¹ But is a deluded, though sincere, mountebank someone we really wish to see as a prophet? And should his ruse really be treated as the word of God?

After a thorough look at not only the statements of Joseph Smith's, but also statements in the Doctrine and Covenants and the Book of Mormon itself (more on this later), Jackson asks the hard questions which those who opt for the Inspired Fiction theory routinely neglect:

Can the Book of Mormon indeed be "true," in any sense, if it lies repeatedly, explicitly, and deliberately regarding its own historicity? Can Joseph Smith be viewed with any level of credibility if he repeatedly, explicitly, and

deliberately lied concerning the historicity of the book? Can we have any degree of confidence in what are presented as the words of God in the Doctrine and Covenants if they repeatedly, explicitly, and deliberately lie by asserting the historicity of the Book of Mormon? If the Book of Mormon is not what it claims to be, what possible cause would anyone have to accept anything of the work of Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints given the consistent assertions that the Book of Mormon is an ancient text that describes ancient events?³²

Hutchinson actually attempts to circumvent the claims of Joseph Smith concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. He insists that the involvement of seer stones, angels, and visions in the claims of Joseph Smith preclude any possibility of the gold plates being real.³³ Unfortunately though, Hutchinson's arguments lack engagement with what was actually claimed by those involved in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

For instance, the testimony of the Eight Witnesses is an obstacle that those who wish to read the Book of Mormon as inspired fiction must overcome. Although revisionists, including Hutchinson, have tried to dismiss the experience of the Eight Witnesses as nothing more than subjective, or visionary, Richard Lloyd Anderson (both before and after the publication of Hutchinson's article) has convincingly challenged this tactic.³⁴ The experience of the Eight Witnesses compliments the more remarkable experience of the Three Witnesses, and lends credibility to the claim, contra Hutchinson, that some sort of physical set of plates (whether ancient or modern) actually existed.³⁵

Hutchinson has not gone unchallenged in his abandonment of the Book of Mormon's historicity (while still speaking of its "inspiration"). Louis Midgley, who is critical of the Inspired Fiction theory of the Book of Mormon, has given specific attention to Hutchinson's theory. Midgley challenges or qualifies almost every aspect of Hutchinson's thesis.³⁶ Midgley's rebuttal of Hutchinson (as well as his other counter-arguments to the Inspired Fiction theory) is substantive, and not to be passed over lightly by those who advocate an Inspired Fiction theory.³⁷

Turning to Price's contention that Joseph Smith was the "inspired author" of the Book of Mormon, the question of whether God would actually inspire a liar is a non-issue for Price, who is an avowed atheist.³⁸ Indeed, Price seems to see the "inspiration" of the Book of Mormon in the same sense that one would see "inspiration" in the works of

Shakespeare or Homer, i.e., nothing more than an excellent literary quality. Because there is no God, Price's "inspiration" means anything except actual revelation. This has not stopped Price from arguing that the Book of Mormon is no more a hoax than are the fictional works of other great authors. "We ought to realize," Price opines, "that for Joseph Smith to be the author of the Book of Mormon, with Moroni and Mormon as narrators, makes moot the old debates over whether Smith was a hoaxer or charlatan."³⁹ By way of comparison, Price asks if Herman Melville and Shakespeare should also be considered hoaxers because they too wrote their fictional narratives in first person, introducing new fictional characters in the process.⁴⁰

This argument falls flat as soon as one realizes that Joseph Smith never claimed the Book of Mormon was fiction like the works of Melville or Shakespeare. He claimed to have translated by miraculous means an ancient record written on real, tangible, physical golden plates given to him by an angel who was once an ancient Nephite prophet and one of the principle authors of the very book Joseph Smith translated. "[T]o my knowledge," Hamblin quips in response to Price, "Shakespeare never said that the resurrected Hamlet appeared to him in a dream and gave him a prewritten play *Hamlet* on golden plates. Shakespeare also never claimed to have been resurrected and ascended into heaven. Frankly, the two examples are not even slightly analogous."⁴¹

To insist on such mercurial definitions of "scripture" and "inspiration" is to make these crucial concepts meaningless, since anything that strikes one's fancy could be qualified as "scripture" or "inspired," if one followed Price's opinion. Or, to paraphrase Robert Alter, "[this] concept of [scripture] becomes so elastic that it threatens to lose descriptive value."⁴² Within the understanding of the Latter-day Saints, what gives a text "inspiration" and makes it "scripture" is not its literary merit, but rather when the text is created under the influence of the Holy Ghost (see Doctrine and Covenants 68:4). Price may call any work of literary excellence "scripture" if he likes, but for him to call the Book of Mormon "scripture" while denying that it comes from God is to introduce a concept totally alien to the faith of the Saints.

This is not to deny that works outside the modern canon can be beneficial or enlightening, or even, in Price's sense, "scriptural," in that they can contain ideas and concepts that, from a Latter-day Saint perspective, are true and in harmony with what God has revealed. Indeed, there is a richness of truth and beauty to be found in works of art, literature, music, and film from multiple cultures and religious traditions. When

Doctrine and Covenants 88:118 directs us to seek “words of wisdom” out of “the best books” it doesn’t restrict these books to only the standard works of the Church. I am therefore not by any means an exclusionist. As a student of German literature, for instance, my soul resonates with many of the writings of the great German Romantics such as Goethe and Schiller. I’d even venture to say that, in some instances, they were genuinely inspired and produced works that comfortably compliment many aspects of my own faith.

However, I do not read *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (which actually happens to be one of my favorite books) or the numerous poems of Schiller in the same way that I read the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants. While I find many aspects of the works of Goethe and Schiller (as well as other authors) profound, I do not believe Goethe and Schiller were prophets in the same sense that I believe Joseph Smith was a prophet. I am confident that other Latter-day Saints have a similar opinion.

The difference should be plainly obvious. From an LDS perspective Joseph Smith not only communed with God through actual heavenly encounters, but also, with the Book of Mormon, provided tangible evidence for God’s existence. As far as I am aware, neither Goethe nor Schiller claimed to have spoken face-to-face with God and Jesus Christ. To adapt Hamblin’s criticism of Price, Goethe never claimed that the studious Faust was a real individual or that the machinations of Mephistopheles actually happened. Nor did Schiller ever claim that a resurrected Albrecht von Wallenstein (who died in 1634) delivered to him the manuscript of his (Schiller’s) fictional dramatic trilogy *Wallensteins Lager/Die Piccolomini/Wallensteins Tod*.⁴³

Dunn doesn’t escape unscathed from criticisms of his thesis either. Both Robert Rees and Richard Williams provide well-argued criticisms of Dunn’s hypothesis that the Book of Mormon is the product of automatic writing.⁴⁴ Rees criticizes Dunn’s double standard in uncritically accepting the accounts of other automatic scribes, while simultaneously questioning Joseph Smith’s own account.

It is surprising that Dunn seems to take at face value the claims of other automatic scribes about the source of their manuscripts but doesn’t seem to accept Joseph Smith’s own account of his sources as valid. That is, if Dunn uncritically accepts the witness of writers of automatic texts regarding the

processes by which they received their material, why question the source Joseph Smith claimed for the Book of Mormon?⁴⁵

For Dunn's hypothesis to work, one must unquestioningly accept the claims of others who produced texts by "automatic writing," but also unquestioningly reject Joseph Smith's own claims concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Why such an inconsistency is warranted is left unexplained by Dunn. But even worse for Dunn are the numerous ways in which the Book of Mormon does not exhibit the characteristics of automatic writing, including not just the actual verification of some of its historical claims, but also the nature of the experience of Joseph Smith and the others involved in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.⁴⁶

Williams argues that the parallels offered by Dunn are not real parallels at all.

Joseph Smith never invoked traditional spiritualist experiences or explanations, unlike spiritualists of the nineteenth century. When I was first contemplating writing this essay, I contacted a professional colleague of mine whose expertise is in the psychology of religion and who is well qualified in matters of spirituality and spiritualism in the history of religion. His initial response to the automaticity hypothesis was that it seemed odd since Joseph Smith, unlike mediums and spiritualists of the nineteenth century, never invoked spiritualism as a source or influence. For most spiritualists, the channeling or mediumship is the crucial issue, but Joseph never made such claims. Rather, he consistently reported that the source of the message was the metal plates and that his own translation occurred by the gift and power of God; he was able to show the plates to several credible witnesses who testified of their existence.⁴⁷

Interestingly, this is not the first time Joseph Smith's alleged mental instability has been used to explain the origin of the Book of Mormon. As early as 1903, B. H. Roberts responded to I. Woodbridge Riley's hypothesis that Joseph Smith was an epileptic,⁴⁸ a bizarre theory that has from time to time subsequently resurfaced.

Historicity as a Necessity for the Theological Vitality of the Book of Mormon

What is the purpose of the Book of Mormon? There is no better place to begin than the title page of the Book of Mormon, which Joseph Smith insisted was translated from the plates, and was not a modern composition.⁴⁹ According to the title page, the purpose of the Book of Mormon is three-fold: 1) “to show unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers”; 2) “that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever”; and 3) “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations.”

“To this list,” according to Elder Jay E. Jensen, “we might add Moroni’s last words on the title page, ‘That ye may be found spotless at the judgment-seat of Christ,’ a vital part of the Book of Mormon’s purpose.”⁵⁰ But does the Book of Mormon have a primary purpose, for which its historicity is so crucial? Elder Jeffrey R. Holland answers in the affirmative:

From the title page to the book’s final declaration, this testament reveals, examines, underscores, and illuminates the divine mission of Jesus Christ as recorded in the sacred accounts of two New World dispensations (Jaredite and Lehite) written for the benefit of a third dispensation, the dispensation of the fulness of times. The Book of Mormon has many purposes, but this one transcends all others.⁵¹

Brant Gardner explains that the Book of Mormon “emphasizes the Atoning Messiah’s mission. The structure of Mormon’s work emphasizes the Messiah, and at the end we have Moroni affirming that the purpose of the Nephite preaching and particularly their records, has been to declare this supremely important message.”⁵²

There is thus a fundamental difference between the Book of Mormon and other writings about Jesus, such as *Ben-Hur* or *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In the case of the Book of Mormon, the theological power of the text comes from its insistence that what it describes actually happened. When a resurrected, deified Christ is purported to have actually appeared to an assembly of ancient descendants of Israel on the American continent, the account is not to be treated with the same sort of perfunctory curiosity or amusement that one would expend on *The Da Vinci Code* or any other modern fictional account about Jesus. *Ben-Hur* and *The Last Temptation of Christ* never profess to be anything more than fictional accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus, even if they are

based, in part, on the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. (Historical fiction is still fiction.) Whatever principles they may convey, they pale in comparison to what the Book of Mormon testifies about Christ. It is all fine and good to read what a modern writer may imagine about Jesus. I am by no means disparaging the work of Lew Wallace or Nikos Kazantzakis. But it is an entirely different matter to read an account that purports to give a real history of Jesus' actions and teachings.

Consider this example given by B. H. Roberts in 1909. In his important three-volume work defending the Restoration, Roberts quotes the following from John Watson.

Were a parchment discovered in an Egyptian mound, six inches square, containing fifty words which were certainly spoken by Jesus, this utterance would count more than all the books which have been published since the first century. If a veritable picture of the Lord could be unearthed from a catacomb, and the world could see with its own eyes what like he was . . . that picture would have at once a solitary place amid the treasures of art.

I can't think of any New Testament scholar, or any historian of Christianity, or any faithful Christian, for that matter, who wouldn't pay a high price to find authentic extra-biblical sayings of Jesus. Roberts likewise sees the significance of this:

If [Watson's observation] be true, and I think no one will question it, then how valuable indeed must be . . . the Book of Mormon! Containing not fifty, but many hundreds of words spoken by Jesus . . . [and] the account of Messiah's appearance and ministry among the people, his very words repeated . . . that we may better understand . . . his teachings. . . . It was mainly for this purpose that the Nephite records were written, preserved, and finally brought forth to the world.⁵³

But the crucial thing Roberts demonstrates is that it is its claimed historical authenticity that makes the Book of Mormon's testimony of Jesus so significant. That, to Roberts, is what makes the Book of Mormon a "new witness" for God. For if the Book of Mormon is historically authentic, then it contains historically authentic sayings of Jesus outside of the Gospels, something that would have hugely significant ramifications for the study of the New Testament and the life and teachings of Jesus. The debate over the historicity of Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, is suddenly cast in

an entirely new light if Jesus *actually* delivered a similar version of such to a group of Nephites in circa AD 33, as recorded by the Book of Mormon.⁵⁴

The ultimate purpose of the Book of Mormon—to prove unto all nations that Jesus is the Eternal God and has performed an infinite atonement—is frustrated if its story about him is not authentically history. “Jesus Christ did show himself unto the people of Nephi, as the multitude were gathered together in the land Bountiful, and did minister unto them; and on this wise did he show himself unto them.” So says Mormon in his editorial introduction to the narrative in 3 Nephi 11–30. But if a resurrected Jesus’ wounds were never really felt by a real group of ancient people (3 Nephi 11:14–15), and if he really didn’t lay his hands on twelve Nephites and give them authority to administer real ordinances (3 Nephi 18–19), or actually declare what the fundamental principles of his Gospel were (3 Nephi 11:31–41; 27:13–22), then the primary witness of the Book of Mormon has absolutely none of the efficacy it proclaims to have.

Those spoken of in the Book of Mormon are portrayed as real individuals who reaped the real blessings of exercising faith in Christ and his atonement. Their stories are never presented as pious fiction, but as fact. What’s all the more exciting for us as modern readers is that the same blessings received by these ancient disciples are promised to be bestowed on us in modern times if we follow the same path.

God has not ceased to be a God of miracles. Behold, are not the things that God hath wrought marvelous in our eyes? Yea, and who can comprehend the marvelous works of God? . . . And who shall say that Jesus Christ did not do many mighty miracles? And there were many mighty miracles wrought by the hands of the apostles. And if there were miracles wrought then, why has God ceased to be a God of miracles and yet be an unchangeable Being? And behold, I say unto you he changeth not; if so he would cease to be God; and he ceaseth not to be God, and is a God of miracles. (Moroni 9:15–19)

Marvelous indeed are these phony miracles if they never happened! Moroni implores us to not abandon faith in a constant God whose miracles and power may continue in our own lives. But if the miracles reported in the Book of Mormon never occurred, then not only is a fictional Moroni a liar, but so too is Joseph Smith, who (either consciously or unconsciously) fabricated stories of fake miracles spoken of in the Book of Mormon.

Likewise, the dire warning given by Nephi at the end of 2 Nephi becomes toothless if Nephi did not actually exist, or if his testimony is nothing more than the product of Joseph Smith's imagination.

And now, my beloved brethren . . . Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that they are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness. . . . And now, my beloved brethren, all those who are of the house of Israel, and all ye ends of the earth, I speak unto you as the voice of one crying from the dust: Farewell until that great day shall come. And you that will not partake of the goodness of God, and respect the words of the Jews, and also my words, and the words which shall proceed forth out of the mouth of the Lamb of God, behold, I bid you an everlasting farewell, for these words shall condemn you at the last day. For what I seal on earth, shall be brought against you at the judgment bar; for thus hath the Lord commanded me, and I must obey. Amen. (2 Nephi 33:10—15)

This impassioned plea from Nephi to remember and keep the words of Christ in the Book of Mormon mean nothing if a real Nephi never said these words. For, if a real Nephi never existed, then a real Nephi will never meet us at the judgment bar of God as he proclaimed would happen, and his imaginary words will not condemn us at the judgment of God, because they were never actually spoken.

The same goes for Moroni's similar insistence that "we shall meet before the judgment-seat of Christ, where all men shall know that my garments are not spotted with your blood. And then shall ye know that I have seen Jesus, and that he hath talked with me face to face, and that he told me in plain humility, even as a man telleth another in mine own language, concerning these things" (Ether 12:38–39), as well as his concluding remarks at the end of the Book of Mormon.

And I exhort you to remember these things; for the time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust? I declare these things unto the fulfilling of

the prophecies. And behold, they shall proceed forth out of the mouth of the everlasting God; and his word shall hiss forth from generation to generation. And God shall show unto you, that that which I have written is true. (Moroni 10:27–29)

If Moroni never existed, then these pronouncements become meaningless, for if the Book of Mormon is fictional, then we will no sooner meet a fictional Moroni at the judgment-seat of Christ than the orphan Oliver Twist, Captain Ahab of the *Pequod*, or the adulteress Hester Prynne.

Elsewhere Moroni writes, “Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing” (Mormon 8:35). Moroni then proceeds to detail an unflattering litany of sins and malfeasances he claims to have been shown in vision several centuries before their manifestation among the latter-day children of men: pride, greed, lust, pollution, unfaithfulness, and other vices. Moroni, after chastising his future readers for their transgressions, ends his woeful prognostications with a dreadful pronouncement: “Behold, the sword of vengeance hangeth over you” (Mormon 8:41). The entire chapter is a humbling read, which includes an earnest plea for us, the modern readers of the Book of Mormon, to repent and return to Christ.

What a sham this warning is if a real Moroni was not shown a real vision of what was to transpire in the last days. Moroni’s own divine sword of Damocles, which hangs over modern society’s collective head, is no more threatening to us than the plastic swords used by children to fight imaginary dragons. Any power, gravity or urgency captured in this chapter—directed by a pleading prophet to a morally decaying people—is swept away if it is fictional, and becomes so worthless that I cannot see how anyone would deign to give it an ounce of credibility.

If what the Book of Mormon reports about Jesus and these other prophets is nothing more than fiction, then the Book of Mormon’s witness of Christ is no more a witness for Christ than any other fictional work. To view the Book of Mormon as nothing more than “inspiring” fiction like any other book would not only destroy the power of the Book of Mormon, but, as explained before, would also cast Joseph Smith in a highly unflattering light: that of a liar (conscious or otherwise) or a raving lunatic. Elder Holland recognized the implications of such, and forcefully admonished that

one has to take a do-or-die stand regarding the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the divine origins of the Book of Mormon. Reason and righteousness require it. Joseph Smith must be accepted either as a prophet of God or else as a charlatan of the first order, but no one should tolerate any ludicrous, even laughable middle ground about the wonderful contours of a young boy's imagination or his remarkable facility for turning a literary phrase. That is an unacceptable position to take—morally, literarily, historically, or theologically.⁵⁵

Many have dismissed this stance as overly melodramatic and the pontifications of a dogmatic fundamentalist who lacks the prudence to read the Book of Mormon stripped of the crass literalism that shackled earlier Mormon exegetes to a hermeneutic of naïveté and credulity. But the fact that lively debate about the authenticity of the Book of Mormon has persisted for nearly two centuries should indicate that many more like Elder Holland have recognized the serious implications attending the book's fraudulence or authenticity.

If we could indeed just read the Book of Mormon as "inspired" fiction, then one wonders why every criticism imaginable has been leveled against it since its publication. Why is this book so threatening? What is so scandalous about this book that writers of many philosophical and religious persuasions have mercilessly rained their rage and fury down upon it? If it is just another nice, "inspiring" fictional book about Jesus, then why the acrimonious denunciations of the Book of Mormon as a vile imposition? Why is the Book of Mormon currently opposed by an army of authorities who feel it a moral imperative and their solemn duty to God or their own inflated sense of reasonableness to expose the Book of Mormon for what it *really* is?

Perhaps Elder Holland has hit a tender nerve when it comes to all of this, namely, that the Book of Mormon forces us to ask the hard questions: is this book real history? Did the stories it records actually happen? Did it come forth the way Joseph Smith said it did, or by some other fraudulent means? And, depending on how one answers these questions, what are the ramifications for the lives of millions of Latter-day Saints throughout the globe, besides the many non-members investigating Mormonism joining the Church of Jesus Christ on the grounds of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon?

The Book of Mormon's Role in the Restoration

The crucial concept of the restoration of the gospel suffers at the hand of the Inspired Fiction theory. A careful look at the role of the Book of Mormon in the Restoration makes this clear. The Book of Mormon itself foretells its own crucial role in the Restoration. Nephi prophesied of the destruction of his seed after their apostasy from God's covenant. But, thankfully, Nephi is shown the restoration of the remnant of his seed in the latter days. How, at least in part, is this restoration to come about?

Nephi speaks of seeing "other books, which came forth by the power of the Lamb, from the Gentiles unto them, unto the convincing of the Gentiles and the remnant of the seed of my brethren, and also the Jews who were scattered upon all the face of the earth, that the records of the prophets and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are true" (1 Nephi 13:39). Nephi then reports how his angelic guide informs him of a future time when these scriptural records shall come forth and spread among the remnant of his seed and "unto all nations" (1 Nephi 13:42), in order to convince them all that "the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father, and the Savior of the world; and that all men must come unto him, or they cannot be saved" (1 Nephi 13:40). The scripture to come forth to convince the people of the earth of the truthfulness of the Bible and restore the plain and precious truths lost to the apostasy is the Book of Mormon.

Sometime after Nephi's vision, Lehi himself prophesies of the future ministry of Joseph Smith. In speaking with his own son named Joseph, Lehi tells of a promise given by the Lord to Joseph of Egypt that he would raise up a "choice seer . . . out of the fruit of thy loins; and he shall be esteemed highly among the fruit of thy loins. And unto him will I give commandment that he shall do a work for the fruit of thy loins, his brethren, which shall be of great worth unto them, even to the bringing of them to the knowledge of the covenants which I have made with thy fathers" (2 Nephi 3:7). This "choice seer," who was to be named after "the name of his father" (2 Nephi 3:15), would be given "power to bring forth my word unto the seed of thy loins—and not to the bringing forth my word only, saith the Lord, but to the convincing them of my word, which shall have already gone forth among them" (2 Nephi 3:11).

Speaking of the Book of Mormon as a "sign" to the latter day "remnant of the house of Jacob" (3 Nephi 21:1–2), a resurrected Jesus prophesied that "these works and the works which shall be wrought among you hereafter [as recorded in the Book of Mormon] shall come forth from the Gentiles, unto your seed which shall dwindle in unbelief because of iniquity" (3 Nephi 21:5). The Book of Mormon "shall be a sign unto them,"

Jesus continues in his discourse, “that they may know that the work of the Father hath already commenced unto the fulfilling of the covenant which he hath made unto the people who are of the house of Israel” (3 Nephi 21:7). One of the purposes of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, therefore, according to the Savior, is to show the remnant of the seed of Israel scattered throughout the Americas the nature and importance of both the covenants they are to enter into with him, as well as the covenants made by their forefathers.

Mormon offers important clarification as to why he hid his record up to come forth in a later day. “[T]hey are to be hid up unto the Lord,” Mormon writes, “that they may come forth in his own due time.”

And behold, they shall go unto the unbelieving of the Jews; and for this intent shall they go—that they may be persuaded that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God; that the Father may bring about, through his most Beloved, his great and eternal purpose, in restoring the Jews, or all the house of Israel, to the land of their inheritance, which the Lord their God hath given them, unto the fulfilling of his covenant. (Mormon 5:12, 14)

Thus, Mormon explains that the Book of Mormon, as taught earlier by Jesus in 3 Nephi, is to act as a witness for Christ and the ancient covenants he made with the house of Israel, that modern Jews may fulfill this covenant and enjoy the blessings thereof.

But how could the Book of Mormon possibly convince others of the truthfulness of biblical teachings if it is fraudulent? And why would God use a book created under false pretenses to serve as the star witness of his existence in the latter days? What are we to think of these prophecies concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon if they were penned no earlier than 1829, and if the genesis of their content is not with Joseph of Egypt, Lehi, or a resurrected Jesus, but instead Joseph Smith? Are we to give God credibility or exhibit any faith in his powers if these passages amount to nothing more than language penned by Joseph Smith about himself? Furthermore, how is a supposedly fictional historical account in the Book of Mormon supposed to convince latter day Jews, Gentiles and the remnant of the house of Israel that Jesus is the Christ, and has made ancient covenants with their forefathers which are to be fulfilled in the last days?⁵⁶

From what we learn in the Doctrine and Covenants, the primary instrument of the Restoration in testifying of the divinity of Christ and explaining the fullness of his gospel

is the Book of Mormon. “My work shall go forth,” the Lord declared in a revelation to Joseph Smith in 1828,

to the Nephites, and the Jacobites, and the Josephites, and the Zoramites, through the testimony of their fathers [the Book of Mormon]. And this testimony shall come to the knowledge of the Lamanites, and the Lemuelites, and the Ishmaelites, who dwindled in unbelief because of the iniquity of their fathers, whom the Lord has suffered to destroy their brethren the Nephites, because of their iniquities and their abominations. For this very purpose are these plates preserved, which contain these records—that the promises of the Lord might be fulfilled, which he made to his people. [T]hat the Lamanites might come to the knowledge of their fathers, and that they might know the promises of the Lord, and that they may believe the gospel and rely upon the merits of Jesus Christ. (D&C 3:16–20)

A year later, in the summer of 1829, the Lord gave a revelation to the Three Witnesses concerning their calling to testify of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon:

You shall have a view of the plates, and also of the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount, when he talked with the Lord face to face, and the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi while in the wilderness, on the borders of the Red Sea. . . . And after that you have obtained faith, and have seen them with your eyes, you shall testify of them, by the power of God. And ye shall testify that you have seen them, even as my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., has seen them; for it is by my power that he has seen them, and it is because he had faith. And he has translated the book, even that part which I have commanded him, and as your Lord and your God liveth it is true. (D&C 17:1–7)

Shortly before the founding of the Church of Christ in April 1830, Martin Harris was commanded to “not covet thine own property, but impart it freely to the printing of the Book of Mormon, which contains the truth and the word of God—Which is my word to the Gentile, that soon it may go to the Jew, of whom the Lamanites are a remnant, that

they may believe the gospel, and look not for a Messiah to come who has already come” (D&C 19:26–27).

Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants, received by revelation in April 1830, speaks, among other things, on the importance of the Book of Mormon in the Restoration, specifically on Joseph Smith’s role in its coming forth.

But after repenting, and humbling himself sincerely, through faith, God ministered unto him by an holy angel, whose countenance was as lightning, and whose garments were pure and white above all other whiteness; And gave unto him commandments which inspired him; And gave him power from on high, by the means which were before prepared, to translate the Book of Mormon; Which contains a record of a fallen people, and the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles and to the Jews also; Which was given by inspiration, and is confirmed to others by the ministering of angels, and is declared unto the world by them—Proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old; Thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever. Amen. (D&C 20: 6—12)

After looking at these teachings in the Doctrine and Covenants, we now ask proponents of the Inspired Fiction theory to answer the following questions:

1. How did the Lord intend to take his gospel to fictional groups who never existed outside the imagination of the Joseph Smith?
2. How precisely were the Witnesses supposed to see nonexistent Nephite relics? Furthermore, what good would testifying of seeing nonexistent Nephite relics do in proving the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon?
3. Why would the Lord speak of the Lamanites as being a real group of people if in fact they weren’t?
4. Why would God speak of Joseph Smith being given power to translate a non-existent book given to him by a non-existent angel Moroni?
5. How does a fictional Book of Mormon prove that God calls prophets both today as well as in ancient times?
6. How does a fictional Book of Mormon prove the truthfulness of the Bible?

Terryl Givens has looked closely at the role of the Book of Mormon in the Restoration, and concludes that

the history of the Book of Mormon's place in Mormonism and American religion generally has always been more connected to its status as *signifier* than *signified*, or its role as a sacred sign rather than its function as persuasive theology. The Book of Mormon is preeminently a concrete manifestation of sacred utterance, and thus an evidence of divine presence, before it is a repository of theological claims.⁵⁷

Or, as Givens writes elsewhere, what outrages rival Christian denominations to this day isn't so much "the content [of the Book of Mormon]," which sincere Christians could hardly object to, "but rather its manner of appearing; its has typically been judged not on the merits of what it *says*, but what it *enacts*."⁵⁸ For the Book of Mormon is undoubtedly the primary evidence for Joseph Smith's divine call. What more could a skeptical world ask for in the way of proof of a genuine prophet than an unlearned New England farm boy "[finding] through the ministration of an holy angel, and translat[ing] into our own language by the gift and power of God"⁵⁹ an ancient record written in "hieroglyphics, the knowledge of which was lost to the world"?⁶⁰ Perceptive scholars like Paul C. Gutjahr recognize this clearly. "The presence of a new sacred text testified to the special status and powers of Joseph, who had translated it, and in turn Joseph testified to the truth of the book through his continuing revelations from God" writes Gutjahr in a refreshingly honest and evenhanded non-Mormon treatment of the Book of Mormon. "Neither the Prophet nor the book would, without the other, wield the oracular power each enjoyed."⁶¹

It is therefore upon the Book of Mormon that Latter-day Saints build their confidence in not only Joseph Smith as a prophet, but the divinity of Christ and his Church. President Ezra Taft Benson taught that

the Church stand[s] or fall[s] with the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. The enemies of the Church understand this clearly. This is why they go to such great lengths to try and disprove the Book of Mormon, for if it can be discredited, the Prophet Joseph Smith goes with it. So does our claim to priesthood keys, and revelation, and the restored Church. But in like manner, if the Book of Mormon is true . . . then one must accept the claims of the Restoration and all that accompanies it.⁶²

Without the historicity of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith has no genuine prophetic qualifications. When the historicity of the Book of Mormon, and by implication the historicity of the Restoration, is sacrificed on the altar of the Inspired Fiction theory, Joseph Smith goes in an instant from being a “choice seer” (2 Nephi 3:7) chosen by God to reveal a new dispensation of the gospel to just another sad example of the type of religious imposter well known throughout history. At best he becomes a well meaning but deluded quack, and at worst a pathological liar. “It should be obvious,” writes Daniel C. Peterson, “that, if the Book of Mormon were false, little or nothing that is distinctive to our faith would stand. Joseph Smith’s prophetic mission and all of the other revelations that came through him would be called into question.”⁶³ It *should* be obvious, but for some inexplicable reason this simple point seems to elude proponents of the Inspired Fiction theory.

Conclusion

The legitimacy of the most important theological claims of the Book of Mormon hinges on whether the attending story that conveys the doctrine actually happened. Its supremely important purpose, to testify that Jesus is the Eternal God and has performed an eternal and infinite atonement, relies entirely on whether the historical testimony of him is authentic. Quite unlike the Psalms or the Proverbs of the Hebrew Bible, or the parables of Jesus in the New Testament, which make absolutely no claim to historicity, the Book of Mormon does nothing but give story after story of claimed historicity to prove the theological validity of the fullness of the doctrine of Christ being expounded within its pages.

The Book of Mormon must be historical and read as history in order for it to really contain the fullness of the theological power it claims to have. If the Book of Mormon is not historical, and if it is read only as fiction, then any pretense to it being an additional witness for the divinity of Jesus in any worthwhile sense is obliterated. The Book of Mormon does not proclaim itself to be fiction. It uncompromisingly proclaims itself, and its message about Christ, to be historical fact. Although fiction about Jesus, including a hypothetically fictional Book of Mormon, may indeed be “inspiring” in a limited literary sense, such is not necessarily the same as it being inspired in a divine sense.

The Inspired Fiction theory is little more than a smokescreen that distracts us from the fact that Joseph Smith’s prophetic authenticity is entirely dependent on the historicity of

the Book of Mormon and the story of its coming forth. Joseph Smith never proclaimed the Book of Mormon to be fiction. The moment Joseph Smith claimed to not only be in the possession of physical golden plates given to him by a resurrected Nephite, but to also have shown these plates to eleven other witnesses, is the moment he allowed himself no comfortable middle ground wherein we can divorce the historicity of the Book of Mormon from either its or Joseph Smith's genuineness. To abandon faith in the historicity of the Book of Mormon is thus to abandon faith in Joseph Smith's sanity and honesty, even his very prophetic credibility.

What are the consequences for the faith of the Saints attending the abandonment of the historicity of the Book of Mormon? What do proponents of the Inspired Fiction reading of the Book of Mormon really ask Latter-day Saints to concede to their half-baked theories? First, it must be conceded, no matter how much he's desperately masked with trivialized adjectives like "inspired" or "pious," that, whatever else he was, Joseph Smith was a liar. Regardless of whether he was conscious of it or not, he was a liar whose fraud has misled millions into sincerely believing the Book of Mormon to be ancient, when in fact its history goes no further back than the 19th century. He either lied or was deluded in claiming that the angel Moroni delivered real golden plates for him to translate. As such, it must be thus also conceded that if such is the case, then the Book of Mormon is not what it claims itself to be. Nephi, Lehi, Alma, Mormon, Moroni never existed in history, and thus are no more real than any other fictional characters in any other fictional novel. They weren't real prophets who gave real testimonies of Jesus to the world. They were entirely the products of Joseph Smith's imagination. Latter-day Saints should read the stories of the Book of Mormon as fiction, thus reducing their nature to that of an inspiring fairytale, and nothing more.

For any Latter-day Saint who takes the truth claims of the Church seriously, these concessions should be totally unacceptable, and vigorously rejected. For what the Inspired Fiction reading of the Book of Mormon asks to concede is nothing less than the very heart and soul of the Church of Jesus Christ. Joseph Smith did not call the Book of Mormon the "keystone of our religion" for no reason.⁶⁴ He knew, as do millions of Saints throughout the world, that to concede the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon is to see the arch of Mormonism come tumbling down in a spectacular crash. Gary Novak puts it bluntly:

If the Book of Mormon is true, if it is authentic history brought forth in the last days for the wise purposes of God, then the Saints have good reason for faith and genuine hope for a trust in God. If the Book of Mormon is the product of deliberate deception or the sincere psychological delusion caused by severe stress, the Saints have no reason for faith or for hope.⁶⁵

To read the Book of Mormon as inspired fiction is not only to violently wrest it out of both its ancient and modern *Sitz im Leben*, but is also to effectively neuter its theology. The grounding of Latter-day Saint faith and practice rests, in an inextricable measure, on the historicity of the Book of Mormon and the attending events surrounding the Restoration. What Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) argued about the Bible certainly holds true for the Book of Mormon:

It is of the very essence of biblical [or Mormon] faith to be about real historical events. It does not tell stories symbolizing suprahistorical truths, but is based on history, history that took place here on this earth. The *factum historicum* (historical fact) is not an interchangeable symbolic cipher for biblical [or Mormon] faith, but the foundation on which it stands: *Et incarnatus est*—when we say these words, we acknowledge God’s actual entry into real history.⁶⁶

I conclude with the simple, sobering declaration of Joseph Smith himself: “Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations and where is our religion? We have none.”⁶⁷

Footnotes

1. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1988), 3.
2. Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2002), 80. Givens has reiterated this point elsewhere. "In a particularly pronounced way, the meaning and value of the Book of Mormon as a religious text are tied to a specific set of historical claims." Terryl Givens, "Foreword," in John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013), xiv.
3. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 187–88.
4. See Louis C. Midgley, "The First Steps," *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): xi–xiv; "Two Stories—One Faith," *FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 55–79; "Remembrance and the Past," *FARMS Review* 19/2 (2007): 37–65; "Debating Evangelicals," *FARMS Review* 20/2 (2008): xxiii–xxvi.
5. For an example of such, see Truman G. Madsen, ed., *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University, 1978).
6. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6.
7. Paul Y. Hoskisson, "The Need for Historicity: Why Banishing God from History Removes Historical Obligation," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University, 2001), 113. Hoskisson's entire article is an important treatment on this subject.
8. See Anthony A. Hutchinson, "The Word of God Is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-Century Scripture," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1993), 1–19.
9. Hutchinson, "The Word of God Is Enough," 1.
10. Hutchinson, "The Word of God Is Enough," 8–16.
11. Hutchinson, "The Word of God Is Enough," 3–7.
12. Hutchinson, "The Word of God Is Enough," 7.
13. Hutchinson, "The Word of God Is Enough," 7.
14. Robert M. Price, "Joseph Smith: Inspired Author of the Book of Mormon," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 2002), 321–366.

15. Price, "Joseph Smith: Inspired Author," 326. Before critics accuse me of creating a false dilemma in this article, the reader should note carefully Price's own false dilemma that unless we adopt his theory the Book of Mormon can only be a "crude hoax or practical joke."
16. Price, "Joseph Smith: Inspired Author," 333.
17. Price, "Joseph Smith: Inspired Author," 347.
18. Scott C. Dunn, "Automaticity and the Book of Mormon," in *American Apocrypha*, 17–46.
19. Dunn, "Automaticity," 36.
20. Dunn, "Automaticity," 26.
21. Dunn, "Automaticity," 30.
22. Dunn, "Automaticity," 31.
23. Dunn, "Automaticity," 34.
24. Dunn, "Automaticity," 35.
25. Dunn, "Automaticity," 35.
26. Givens, "Foreword," in Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, xiv.
27. William J. Hamblin, "An Apologist for the Critics: Brent Lee Metcalfe's Assumptions and Methodologies," *FARMS Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994), 452–53.
28. Hamblin, "An Apologist for the Critics," 453.
29. Kent P. Jackson, "Joseph Smith and the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, 123. Givens agrees with Hamblin and Jackson. "The book's unambiguous account of its own construction, as well as the historically defined reciprocity between Joseph Smith's own moral authority as a religious leader and the sacred status of the book inseparably wedded to his claims and career, admits of no simple divorce [between the Book of Mormon's authenticity and its historicity]." Givens, "Foreword," in Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, xiv.
30. For a collection of Joseph Smith's statements on the historicity of the Book of Mormon, see Jackson, "Joseph Smith and the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," 127–133.
31. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed. (New York, N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971); Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 2004).
32. Jackson, "Joseph Smith and the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," 137–38, emphasis in original.
33. Hutchinson, "The Word of God is Enough," 6–7.
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