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## *Et Incarnatus Est: The Imperative for Book of Mormon Historicity*

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*Et Incarnatus Est:*  
The Imperative for Book of Mormon  
Historicity

Stephen O. Smoot

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***ET INCARNATUS EST:***  
**THE IMPERATIVE FOR BOOK OF MORMON**  
**HISTORICITY**

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**Stephen O. Smoot**

**Abstract:** *Some have come to insist that the Book of Mormon should be read as inspired fiction, which is to say that readers, including Latter-day Saints, should abandon any belief in the Book of Mormon as an authentic ancient text and instead should see it as an inspired frontier novel written by Joseph Smith that may act as scripture for those who follow his teachings. This paper provides reasoning to reject this proposition as not only logically incoherent but also theologically impotent.<sup>1</sup> It raises the objection that this position fundamentally undercuts the credibility of Joseph Smith. The Prophet's direct claims concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon as well as how the Book of Mormon presents itself to the world do not easily permit any leeway for a "middle ground" on this matter.*

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 Nibley

**T**he Book of Mormon claims to be “an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites ... [and] an abridgment taken from 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 proven to be somewhat awkward for religious scholars

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1. An earlier version of this paper appeared as Stephen O. Smoot, “The Imperative for a Historical Book of Mormon”, The Interpreter Foundation, Oct 20, 2013, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/the-imperative-for-a-historical-book-of-mormon/>.

who are comfortable in safely doting over neglected or long-forgotten religious texts that are considered little more than academic curiosities. When confronted with the book's claims to historicity, non-Latter-day Saint scholars are often compelled either to stake out a position on such or politely refrain by "bracketing" the question altogether, focusing on less volatile matters (such as reception history). Indeed, the touchy manner in which Book of Mormon historicity is often broached in contemporary academia calls to mind the quip once made by Jacob Neusner: "Religious experience in the third century is fascinating. Religious experience in the twentieth century is frightening or absurd."<sup>2</sup>

The Book of Mormon's origins being wrapped up with claims of angels and gold plates and seer stones and ancient Israelites sailing to the New World exacerbates an already uncomfortable situation for those who "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." But why precisely have historians attempting secular approaches to Latter-day Saint history been so "hard-pressed to devise nonliteral readings" of the Book of Mormon? Whence this discomfort? The answer is obvious: "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."<sup>3</sup>

Even scholars who bracket Book of Mormon historicity, such as Grant Hardy in his de-historicized literary analysis of the text, have acknowledged this.

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

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2. Jacob Neusner, "Religious Studies: The Next Location," *Bulletin of the Council on the Study of Religion* 8, no. 5 (December 1977): 117.

3. Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: 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 to *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book*, by John L. Sorenson (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013), xiv.

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.<sup>4</sup>

An honest reckoning of the claims made by Joseph Smith, to say nothing of the Book of Mormon itself, leads to an inescapable conclusion which I shall argue for in the following pages of this article: the historicity of the Book of Mormon is an imperative for the legitimacy of Mormonism as a theological, moral, and metaphysical system. The book not only must be chiefly read as a sacred history of God's dealings with a remnant of the house of Israel in ancient America but must also actually be such a history for it to carry any meaningful theological and moral legitimacy.

### **The Inspired Fiction Theory for 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 "inspired" scripture in some sense, some have originated a theory that the Book of Mormon may not be historical yet somehow revelatory or inspired and therefore scriptural. For the sake of convenience, I call this the Inspired Fiction Theory (IFT) for the Book of Mormon.

Perhaps the chief architect of the IFT is Anthony A. Hutchinson, who in the early 1990s made, as far as I can tell, the first serious case for such.<sup>5</sup> Hutchinson begins his articulation of the theory thus:

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.<sup>6</sup>

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 Latter-day Saint scholars who have argued

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4. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6.

5. 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: Signature Books, 1993), 1–19.

6. *Ibid.*, 1.

for the ancient authenticity of the Book of Mormon, lamenting that he cannot see any redeeming argument for historicity.<sup>7</sup> Hutchinson further voices suspicion concerning the trustworthiness of the accounts provided by Joseph Smith and his closest associates (such as the Three and Eight Witnesses) for the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.<sup>8</sup> Given the underwhelming evidence for Book of Mormon's antiquity and the "visionary character"<sup>9</sup> of Joseph Smith's claims, Hutchinson insists that there were no real Nephites, no golden plates, and no angel Moroni outside of the fruitful imagination of the impressionable Palmyra seer.

But despite his insistence on the Book of Mormon's unhistorical nature, Hutchinson does 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."<sup>10</sup> All that is therefore needed to accept the Book of Mormon as scripture, Hutchinson believes, is to confess faith in a compelling story, regardless of whether that story actually ever happened.

Hutchinson is by no means alone in promulgating the IFT. When he is not busy casting doubt on the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth,<sup>11</sup> Robert M. Price asks us to acknowledge Joseph Smith as the "inspired author" of the Book of Mormon.<sup>12</sup> "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."<sup>13</sup> But the non-historicity of the Book of Mormon apparently 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 grand 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

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7. Ibid., 8–16.

8. Ibid., 3–7.

9. Ibid., 7.

10. Ibid., 7.

11. Price is a well-known and outspoken "Jesus Mythicist" who denies the historical existence of Jesus.

12. 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: Signature Books, 2002), 321–66.

13. Ibid., 326.

Bible exegesis by creating a new scripture that would undercut the debating of the denominations and render them superfluous.<sup>14</sup>

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

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.<sup>15</sup>

Price feels no constraint in rhapsodizing on the Book of Mormon as inspired pseudepigrapha and Joseph Smith as its inspired author. This, Price explains, frees us from the discomfiture inherent in an obviously unhistorical Book of Mormon being held up as historical by decades of dogma in the The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and opens up new vistas of scriptural exploration. Now the Book of Mormon can be read the way it should have been all along: as nonliteral, unhistorical, and fictitious. Were it not for the fact that he essentially calls Joseph Smith a creative liar, Latter-day Saints might well be pleased to see Price so favorably comparing their prophet to the (equally mendacious) authors of the Bible!

Then there is Scott Dunn, who makes the case for the Book of Mormon as a specimen of "automatic writing."<sup>16</sup> Automatic writing is the "claimed psychic ability allowing a person to produce written words without consciously writing. The words purportedly arise from a subconscious, spiritual, or supernatural force."<sup>17</sup> In this scenario, we are to understand that Joseph Smith was a psychic savant who channeled the

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14. Ibid., 333.

15. Ibid., 347.

16. Scott C. Dunn, "Automaticity and the Book of Mormon," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 17–46.

17. Wikipedia, s.v. "Automatic writing," last modified September 15, 2018, 03:27, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Automatic\\_writing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Automatic_writing).



text of the Book of Mormon from an “intelligence” outside of himself.<sup>18</sup> Rather than scandalize Latter-day Saints, Dunn muses on the possibility that “God use[s] automatic writing to help his prophets produce latter-day scripture.”<sup>19</sup> If we view the Book of Mormon as the offspring of Joseph Smith’s (godly?) psychosis, “wholly or partially the result of [his] psychological processes,”<sup>20</sup> we can safely put it next to other impactful books that were likewise purportedly the result of automatic dictation, including *A Course in Miracles* by Helen Cohn Schucman, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, and *Jerusalem* by William Blake.

But what, exactly, leads Dunn to conclude that the Book of Mormon is the product of automatic writing? Nothing less than a commanding “number of parallels ... between Joseph Smith’s production of scripture and instances of automatic writing.”<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

As if that weren’t enough to clinch the matter, Dunn draws attention to the dubious manner in which Joseph Smith created the Book of Mormon. Peering into a “crystal or stone,”<sup>23</sup> Joseph effortlessly dictated page after page of text at a breathtakingly fast pace without referencing notes or making corrections. This process, Dunn avows, is unmistakably characteristic of automatic writing. “Automatic writing ... provides a simple explanation of these circumstances,”<sup>24</sup> he insists. As with Hutchinson and Price, Dunn believes that his iteration of the IFT renders moot the question of the Book of Mormon’s contested origins, inasmuch as automatic writing can account for such things 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 argument made by some

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18. Dunn, “Automaticity and the Book of Mormon,” 19.

19. *Ibid.*, 36.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 26.

22. *Ibid.*, 30.

23. *Ibid.*, 31.

24. *Ibid.*, 34.

“that Smith was too ignorant and uneducated to create a book of such complex construction and profound teachings.”<sup>25</sup>

In other words, with Dunn’s version of the IFT there is no need to debate whether Joseph pilfered Ethan Smith’s *View of the Hebrews* (a favorite candidate as a source of supposed plagiarism) or had at his disposal a copy of the Bible during the production of the Book of Mormon.<sup>26</sup> After all, automatic writing allegedly grants a medium the ability to unconsciously channel previously retained information through “quirk of memory” known as *cryptomnesia*.<sup>27</sup> This innocent memory bias would grant Joseph subconscious recall of, say, what he learned during his time scrutinizing the Bible or the holdings of the Manchester village library without turning him into a conscious fraud.

On the flipside, according to Dunn, it is irrelevant for Book of Mormon apologists to argue for the text’s complexity as a way to shore up its credibility, since automatic writing has also 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.” But “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.<sup>28</sup>

As such, Dunn urges, readers need to stop fretting over the historicity of the Book of Mormon, or whether it has nineteenth 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 marvel of automatic writing. And after all, what more could the faithful ask for than to have their prophet go from being a two-timing huckster to a literary bright like William Blake and Charlotte Brontë!

More recently Ann Taves, a professor of religious studies at UC Santa Barbara, has argued for what she calls the “materialization” of authentic Nephite relics out of a mundane act of fabrication on Joseph Smith’s

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25. Ibid., 35.

26. Ibid., 34.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 35.

part.<sup>29</sup> Wishing to bridge the seemingly impassible divide between those who dismiss Joseph as a conscious fraud and those who revere him as an inspired prophet,<sup>30</sup> Taves attempts to “open up some new options” by “playing with the idea of [the] discovery” of the gold plates not “as a literal recovery” of ancient artifacts but as an act of “skillful seeing.”<sup>31</sup>

In Taves’ formulation, Joseph began as a sincere visionary who materialized his subjective encounters with the divine through an act of pious concoction. “As a highly imaginative individual, prone to visionary experiences,” Taves writes, “Smith may well have believed he saw the plates in his visits to the hill.”<sup>32</sup> This sincere religious or metaphysical conviction granted Joseph the conscientious fortitude to create “a representation of the plates” he saw in vision by forging his own set of plates.<sup>33</sup> Rather than engaging in deception, however, Taves believes Joseph faked the plates “in the knowledge that they would become the sacred reality that the Smith family believed them to be.”<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, the plates are not a dishonest forgery, but rather comparable to “the way a crucifix represents the crucifixion, an Eastern Orthodox icon is said to manifest the reality of the saint it depicts, the way Eucharistic wafers are thought to be transformed into the literal body of Christ, or the way that Mary ‘created’ Jesus in her womb.”<sup>35</sup> In fact, Taves even compares Joseph’s materialization of the plates to the process of the Lord making shining stones for the Brother of Jared in the Book of Mormon (Ether 3).<sup>36</sup>

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29. Ann Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Golden Plates,” *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 61, no. 2–3 (2014): 182–207; reprinted in *The Expanded Canon: Perspectives on Mormonism and Sacred Texts*, ed. Blair G. Van Dyke, Brian D. Birch, and Boyd J. Peterson (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2018), 93–119; Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies in the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 50–65.

30. “The challenge, however, is not just to explain how [the plates] might have become real for Smith, but how they might have become real for him in some non-delusory sense. This shift in premises forces us to consider a greater range of explanatory possibilities and has the potential to expand our understanding of the way new spiritual paths emerge.” Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 51, emphasis in original.

31. Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation”, 96–97.

32. *Ibid.*, 103.

33. *Ibid.*, 104.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, 105.

36. Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation,” 105–07; *Revelatory Events*, 60–62.

“In comparing the gold plates and the Eucharistic wafer,” Taves hastily clarifies, “I am not making an argument for the reality of ancient plates (or the real presence of Christ) but raising the possibility that when materializing the plates, Smith might have been thinking more like a good Catholic than a good Calvinist. The comparison, in other words, allows us to consider the possibility that Smith viewed something that he had made (metal plates) as a vehicle through which something sacred — the ancient golden plates — could be made (really) present.”<sup>37</sup> That may be well and good, but what about those who would insist that Joseph Smith’s sincere belief that he had plates given to him by an angel was merely a manifestation of a psychotic delusion? Taves anticipates this objection by arguing that “strictly speaking, from a psychiatric perspective, we can’t call Smith delusional” because “the distinction between ordinary belief and delusion turns on context, that is, on whether the beliefs make sense within the context of a culture or subculture.”<sup>38</sup> The oft-discussed “magic world view”<sup>39</sup> of Joseph Smith and his contemporaries affords the Prophet’s claims about angels and seer stones a contextual home that spares him the shameful reproach of being labeled “delusional,” according to Taves.<sup>40</sup>

As such, Taves concludes, the testimony of Joseph Smith and others who affirmed the existence of the plates “should not be taken as testimony to the materiality of *ancient* golden plates but rather as testimony to the witnesses’ ability to see reality in the way Joseph Smith did, that is, as a supernaturally charged reality in which angels produced, transported, and ultimately withdrew a believed-in simulation.”<sup>41</sup> For Taves, then, the experience shared by Joseph Smith and his closest family and friends with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon was not a miraculous recovery of an ancient record or conscious deception, but a process of turning what began as a personal “dream-vision”<sup>42</sup> of Joseph Smith into a communal experience crafted through a process of materializing a sincerely believed religious artifice.

In a survey of these arguments, the commonalities between these and other renderings of the IFT become clear. First, in each recasting

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37. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 63.

38. Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation,” 109.

39. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996).

40. Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation,” 110.

41. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 65, emphasis in original.

42. *Ibid.*, 55–56.

of this theory, Joseph Smith was never in the possession of ancient Nephite plates, or ancient Nephite Interpreters, or any other ancient Nephite artifacts, for that matter. These were either fabricated to bamboozle Joseph’s family and friends or were just imagined altogether (or, in Taves’ more charitable formulation, were fabricated and then out of an act of sincere religious conviction metaphysically alchemized into genuine Nephite relics). Second, nothing recorded in the Book of Mormon corresponds to historical reality. Third, the historicity of the Book of Mormon is irrelevant with regard to whether the book is “inspired.” Scripture does not need to be historical to be from God, and that includes the Book of Mormon.

### **The Incoherence of the Inspired Fictionists**

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 do not work. The logical flaws in these and other iterations of the IFT are manifold. “For a variety of reasons” which we shall now outline, “such efforts [to read the Book of Mormon as inspired fiction] may be well intentioned, but they are untenable.”<sup>43</sup>

Before anything else, it is necessary to point out that the IFT is problematic in that it begs the question of the Book of Mormon’s non-historicity. In other words, proponents of the IFT must first assume that the Book of Mormon is not historical before they can proceed any further. This conclusion, however, is far from foregone and is in fact highly debatable. If the work of Latter-day Saint scholars in the past 50 years has proven anything, it is that a rigorous defense of the Book of Mormon’s historicity can be 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.<sup>44</sup> This is precisely what proponents of the IFT have *not* done. They have not adequately responded to the work of scholars writing on behalf of the Book of Mormon’s historicity. With few exceptions, they have

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43. Givens, foreword to *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book*, xiv.

44. See Neal Rappleye, “Creating a List of “Standard Works” on Book of Mormon Authenticity,” Studio Et Quoque Fide (blog), October 25, 2013, <http://www.studioetquoquefide.com/2013/10/creating-list-of-standard-works-on-book.html>; Brant Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015); John W. Welch et al., eds., *Knowing Why: 137 Evidences that the Book of Mormon is True* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2017).

merely assumed or uncritically accepted the conclusion that the Book of Mormon is not historical.

The problems with the IFT's foundational assumptions aside, William Hamblin has succinctly summarized what is perhaps the most fatal logical inconsistency with this system:

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).<sup>45</sup>

The case against the IFT can be elucidated with this simple question, which proponents of such 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 delusional? Or was he perhaps a sincere liar, in that he came to believe in his own delusion? 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 puts it,

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.<sup>46</sup>

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45. 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, no. 1 (1994): 453.

46. Hamblin, "An Apologist for the Critics," 453.

Kent Jackson has made this point even more forcefully: “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?<sup>47</sup>

Inconveniently for proponents of the IFT, Joseph Smith’s insistence on the historicity of the Book of Mormon, as well as the reality of his encounter with the angel Moroni and his translation of the plates, was constant throughout his life. To ignore or obfuscate this fact is to wink at a foundational piece of evidence in assessing the nature of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s truth claims. The well-documented firsthand statements of Joseph Smith describing the coming forth of the Book of Mormon *must* be satisfactorily explained by the proponents of the IFT.<sup>48</sup>

If we grant that Joseph Smith was the author — even the “inspired author” of the Book of Mormon — we must then 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? Perhaps Joseph came to believe his own delusions, as some have argued.<sup>49</sup> But is a deluded though sincere mountebank someone we really wish to follow as a prophet? And should his ruse really be treated

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47. Kent P. Jackson, “Joseph Smith and the Historicity of the Book of Mormon,” in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 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 to *Mormon’s Codex*, xiv.

48. 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,” 127–33.

49. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971); Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004).

as the word of God? After a thorough look at not only the statements of Joseph Smith but also statements in the Doctrine and Covenants and the Book of Mormon itself, Jackson asks some hard questions which those who opt for the IFT 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?<sup>50</sup>

Hutchinson attempts to circumvent this problem by insisting that the involvement of seer stones, angels, and visions in Joseph Smith’s narrative preclude any possibility of the gold plates being real.<sup>51</sup> Taves likewise attempts to maneuver around this stumbling block for her thesis by downplaying the physicality or real-worldliness of the experiences of the Book of Mormon witnesses.<sup>52</sup> But these arguments do not engage 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 banish the Book of Mormon to the purely metaphysical realm must overcome. Although IFT revisionists have tried to dismiss the experience of the Eight Witnesses as nothing more than subjective or visionary, Richard Lloyd Anderson has convincingly thwarted this tactic.<sup>53</sup> The experience of the Eight Witnesses complements the more visionary experience of the Three Witnesses and lends credibility to the claim that a physical set of plates “which has the

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50. Jackson, “Joseph Smith and the Historicity of the Book of Mormon,” 137–38, emphasis in original.

51. Hutchinson, “The Word of God is Enough,” 6–7.

52. Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation,” 101–02.

53. Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), esp. 123–79; Anderson, “Attempts to Redefine the Experience of the Eight Witnesses,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 18–31.



appearance of ancient work” actually existed (Testimony of the Eight Witnesses).<sup>54</sup>

Additional deconstruction of Hutchinson’s thesis in particular could be furnished, but for brevity’s sake it is needful here only to mention the work of Louis Midgley, who has provided a sustained critique of Hutchinson’s work.<sup>55</sup> Midgley’s rebuttal of Hutchinson (as well as his other counter-arguments to the IFT) is substantive, not to be passed over lightly by those who advocate the IFT.<sup>56</sup>

Turning to Price’s contention that Joseph Smith was the inspired author of the Book of Mormon, the question of whether God would inspire a liar is a non-issue for Price, who is an avowed atheist.<sup>57</sup> Because there is no God, Price’s “inspiration” means anything except actual revelation. 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. “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.”<sup>58</sup> By way of comparison, Price asks if Herman Melville and Shakespeare should also be considered hoaxers, because they too

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54. See Steven C. Harper, “Evaluating the Book of Mormon Witnesses,” *The Religious Educator* 11, no. 2 (2010): 37–49; Gale Yancey Anderson, “Eleven Witnesses Behold the Plates,” *The Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 145–62; Steven C. Harper, “The Eleven Witnesses,” in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 117–32.

55. Louis C. Midgley, “The Current Battle over the Book of Mormon: ‘Is Modernity Itself Somehow Canonical?’” *FARMS Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6, no. 1 (1994): 200–54.

56. Louis Midgley, “‘Inspiring’ but Not True: An Added Glimpse of the RLDS Stance on the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 218–28; “‘To Remember and Keep’: On the Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew W. Hedges (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 95–137; “No Middle Ground: The Debate over the Authenticity of the Book of Mormon,” in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, 149–70.

57. Louis C. Midgley, “Atheist Piety: A Religion of Dogmatic Dubiety,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 123–30.

58. Robert M. Price, “Prophecy and Palimpsest,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 3 (2002): 69.

wrote their fictional narratives in first person, introducing new fictional characters in the process.<sup>59</sup>

This argument, however, falls flat as soon as one realizes that Joseph Smith never claimed the Book of Mormon was fiction. He claimed, rather, to have translated by miraculous means an ancient record written on tangible golden plates given to him by an angel, an angel who for good measure was once an ancient prophet and in fact one of the principle authors of the very book! “To 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.”<sup>60</sup>

To insist on such mercurial definitions of “scripture” and “inspiration” as Price would have us do is to make these crucial concepts almost meaningless. To paraphrase Robert Alter, “[This] concept of [scripture] becomes so elastic that it threatens to lose descriptive value.”<sup>61</sup> Within Latter-day Saint theology, what gives a text “inspiration” and makes it “scripture” is not its literary merit but when the text is created under the influence of the Holy Ghost (see Doctrine and Covenants 68:4). But Price does not believe the Holy Ghost is real. He 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 Latter-day Saints.

This is not to deny that works outside the modern canon can be beneficial or enlightening or perhaps even “scriptural” in a loose sense in that they might 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. Latter-day Saints are therefore not by any means exclusionist when it comes to granting the presence of divine inspiration in many sources.<sup>62</sup> But this is entirely different from what Price is getting at in his talk about the Book of Mormon’s being inspired fiction.

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59. Price, “Prophecy and Palimpsest,” 68–69.

60. William J. Hamblin, “Priced to Sell,” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 1 (2004): 45.

61. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 15.

62. Compare the First Presidency’s 1978 declaration affirming that “the great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers,

Nor does Dunn escape unscathed from criticism. 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.<sup>63</sup> 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?<sup>64</sup>

For Dunn's hypothesis to work, he 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. Additionally problematic are the numerous ways in which the Book of Mormon does *not* exhibit 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.<sup>65</sup>

Williams even goes so far as to argue 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

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as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals." The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Statement of the First Presidency regarding God's Love for All Mankind," news release, Feb. 15, 1978.

63. Robert A. Rees, "The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006): 4–17; Richard N. Williams, "The Book of Mormon as Automatic Writing: Beware the Virtus Dormitiva," *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 23–29.

64. Rees, "The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing," 9.

65. Discussed in Rees, "The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing," 12–15.

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.<sup>66</sup>

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,<sup>67</sup> a bizarre theory that has from time to time resurfaced.

As for Taves, while she presents her version of the IFT with scrupulous politeness, it ultimately amounts to little more than a modified retelling of the pious-fraud theory made popular in recent years by Dan Vogel (whom Taves approvingly quotes throughout her own work). The problem with Taves' particular theory is twofold. First, she is able to make a case only for what she herself admits is a largely "conjectural"<sup>68</sup> reading of the historical evidence by obscuring what Joseph and his closest supporters believed about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Contrary to what Taves claims, there is not "too much conflicting evidence to come to a firm conclusion about what Smith really believed about the plates."<sup>69</sup> Besides Jackson's work cited above,<sup>70</sup> the recent analysis provided by MacKay and Dirkmaat, to name just one example, amply demonstrates that Joseph Smith left a crystal-clear account of how he recovered and translated the Book of Mormon and what such meant for him and his followers.<sup>71</sup>

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66. Williams, "The Book of Mormon as Automatic Writing," 27.

67. B. H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith and the Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1907), 1:42–55.

68. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 51.

69. *Ibid.*

70. Jackson, "Joseph Smith and the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," 123–40.

71. Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2015); reviewed in Stephen O. Smoot, "Telling the Story of the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 19 (2016): 67–82.

Taves' contention that the "materialization" of the gold plates is comparable to the Catholic Eucharist or the Orthodox icon might be appropriate if Joseph or any of his early followers ever claimed to understand the existence of the Book of Mormon plates in those terms, but in fact there is no evidence that any of them did. The only evidence Taves cites which might come close to satisfying this requirement is the early letter from Joseph's skeptical uncle Jesse Smith to the former's brother Hyrum.<sup>72</sup> In this letter Jesse vehemently denies any particle of truth to his nephew's visionary claims, and dismisses Joseph's enterprise as a blasphemous outrage. At one point he speaks of Joseph "mak[ing] his own gods" and having "eyes to see things that are not."<sup>73</sup> Taves esteems this letter as "an extraordinarily rich passage that opens up ... lines of inquiry" into the direction she wishes to take her readers (that is, to her own version of the IFT).<sup>74</sup> This, however, hardly seems warranted. Instead of seeing Jesse Smith's letter as a sort of profound window into Joseph Smith's religious consciousness, as Taves does, it should instead be read in light of how most of Joseph Smith's contemporaries reacted to his claims: as a scornful dismissal of Joseph's truth claims.

This brings us to the second failing of Taves' thesis. To avoid the logical pitfall articulated above (how does Joseph Smith not come out as utterly delusional if he did not possess real ancient plates?) Taves attempts to categorize Joseph as something other than "delusional" as defined by current psychiatric standards. She insists, as seen above, that "the distinction between ordinary [religious] belief," such as those she determines were held by Joseph Smith, and "delusion turns on context, that is, on *whether the beliefs make sense within the context of a culture or subculture.*"<sup>75</sup> So the question is whether Joseph Smith's claims (an angel came to him and gave him golden plates, which he translated with a seer stone) would have made sense within the context of Western New York in the mid- to late-1820s. Taves believes the answer is yes and cites Quinn as justification.<sup>76</sup>

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72. Jesse Smith to Hyrum Smith, 17 June 1829, reprinted in Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:551–54.

73. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:552.

74. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 52.

75. Taves, "History and the Claims of Revelation," 109, emphasis added.

76. It should be noted that Quinn's work on the early Mormon connection to the "magical world view" has itself not escaped considerable critique and deconstruction. See John Gee, "An Obstacle to Deeper Understanding," *FARMS Review of Books* 12, no. 2 (2000): 185–224; William J. Hamblin, "That Old Black Magic," *FARMS Review of Books* 12, no. 2 (2000): 225–393; Mark Ashurst-McGee, "A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Junior as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Juedo-Christian

But this overlooks what I believe is an important piece of evidence: how most of those outside of Joseph Smith’s immediate circle of family and friends reacted to the young seer’s claims. In fact, even a cursory glance at contemporary reactions to the Book of Mormon reveals an unrelenting torrent of incredulity, derision, and mockery from Joseph Smith’s neighbors. In June of 1829, the same month that Jesse Smith scorned his nephew for his visionary claims, the *Wayne Sentinel* spoke of “much speculation” swirling around “a pretended discovery, through superhuman means, of an ancient record, of a religious and divine nature and origin, written in ancient characters impossible to be interpreted by any to whom the special gift has not been imparted by inspiration.” The article went on to report that “most people entertain an idea that the whole matter is the result of a gross imposition, and a grosser superstition.”<sup>77</sup> Jonathon Hadley, a Rochester newspaperman who was consulted to possibly print the Book of Mormon,<sup>78</sup> dismissed Joseph Smith’s report of the recovery and translation of the record as “the greatest piece of superstition that has come within our knowledge.” The “account of this discovery was soon circulated,” Hadley continues, and was “almost invariably treated as it should have been — with *contempt*.” Those who did believe Joseph’s story, such as Martin Harris, were disdainfully written off as “blindly credulous” dupes.<sup>79</sup>

The pugnacious Abner Cole, editor of the *Palmyra Reflector* who published pilfered extracts of the Book of Mormon before its full release in March 1830,<sup>80</sup> not only mercilessly lampooned the Book of Mormon with his satirical Book of Pukei,<sup>81</sup> but did not hesitate to compare

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Prophet” (Master’s Thesis, Utah State University, 2000); Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2011); Kerry Muhlestein, “Seeking Divine Interaction: Joseph Smith’s Varying Searches for the Supernatural,” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 77–91; Samuel M. Brown, “The Reluctant Metaphysicians,” *Mormon Studies Review* 1 (2014): 115–31; Richard Lyman Bushman, “Joseph Smith and Money Digging,” in *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History*, ed. Laura Harris Hales (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2016), 1–6; Eric A. Eliason, “Seer Stones, Salamanders, and Early Mormon ‘Folk Magic’ in the Light of Folklore Studies and Bible Scholarship,” *BYU Studies* 55, no. 1 (2016): 73–93.

77. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:218–19.

78. MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, 166–68.

79. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:221–22, emphasis in original.

80. MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, 206–12.

81. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:231–37.

Joseph Smith with “the most notorious impostors that have figured either in ancient or modern times.”<sup>82</sup> *The Gem*, a paper out of nearby Rochester, announced the publication of the Book of Mormon with the excited headline “IMPOSITION AND BLASPHEMY!!” Joseph Smith’s claims, the paper indignantly proclaimed, were “in point of blasphemy and imposition, the very summit.”<sup>83</sup> The very man who typeset the Book of Mormon when it went to press in the fall of 1829, John Gilbert, himself deemed the book “a very big humbug.”<sup>84</sup> Finally, there is Alexander Campbell, who published the first serious and sustained critique of the Book of Mormon in his *Millennial Harbinger* in 1831. Fittingly for this present discussion, what word did Campbell use to summarize Joseph Smith’s claims? “Delusions.”<sup>85</sup> Thundered Campbell,

The [Book of Mormon] professes to be written at intervals and by different persons during the long period of 1020 years. And yet for uniformity of style, there never was a book more evidently written by one set of fingers, nor more certainly conceived in one cranium since the first book appeared in human language, than this same book. If I could swear to any man’s voice, face or person, assuming different names, I could swear that this book was written by one man. And as Joseph Smith is a very *ignorant* man and is called *the author* on the title page, I cannot doubt for a single moment that he is the sole author and proprietor of it.<sup>86</sup>

This declaration, naturally, is accompanied by accusations that the Book of Mormon is an “impious fraud”<sup>87</sup> and Joseph Smith an “ignorant and impudent liar.”<sup>88</sup> Even those sympathetic enough to Joseph’s claims to examine the Book of Mormon with even a modicum of objectivity were initially taken aback by the strangeness of the circumstances surrounding its purported origin. Parley P. Pratt recalled his encounter with “an old Baptist deacon by the name of Hamlin” who “began to tell of a *book*,

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82. *Ibid.*, 2:241.

83. “Imposition and Blasphemy!! Money-Diggers, Etc.” *The Gem, of Literature and Science* 2, no.2 (May 15, 1830): 15.

84. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:551.

85. Alexander Campbell, “Delusions,” *The Millennial Harbinger* 2, no. 2 (February 7, 1831): 85–96; reprinted as *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon* (Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1832).

86. Campbell, “Delusions,” 93.

87. *Ibid.*, 91.

88. *Ibid.*, 92.

a STRANGE BOOK, a VERY STRANGE BOOK! in his possession, which had been just published.” What made this book so strange? “This book ... purported to have been originally written on plates either of gold or brass, by a branch of the tribes of Israel; and to have been discovered and translated by a young man near Palmyra, in the State of New York, by the aid of visions, or the ministry of angels.”<sup>89</sup> Rather than immediately accept this account, however, Pratt first ventured to Palmyra “and inquired for the residence of Mr. Joseph Smith.” Only after interrogating Hyrum Smith, one of those involved in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and “duly weighing the whole matter in [his] mind,” did Pratt accept that “[Joseph’s claims] were true.”<sup>90</sup>

“Imposition.” “Superstition.” “Humbug.” “Impostor.” “Delusion.” “Fraud.” These are hardly the reactions one would expect if in fact Joseph Smith’s claims were right at home in the religious and cultural environment of his Palmyra residence.<sup>91</sup> It was precisely because Joseph Smith’s description of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon was so outrageous and extravagant to contemporary sensibilities that the entire affair was sneeringly written off as a superstition or a hoax by so many. It was precisely because Joseph Smith’s claims were so wild that Charles Anthon, as he remembered years after the event, ominously warned Martin Harris in the winter of 1828 that he was being taken in by a charlatan.<sup>92</sup>

While it is true that Joseph did enjoy some early followers in New York (followers whom early opponents of Joseph Smith deemed just as delusional as their prophetic leader), the overwhelmingly skeptical reception the Book of Mormon received in its early years of circulation is, I believe, strong evidence against Taves’ argument. Fluhman observes that “the Book of Mormon served [nineteenth century] anti-Mormons as the quintessential sign of Smith’s fraud”<sup>93</sup> and “the glaring marker

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89. Parley P. Pratt, *The Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt* (New York: Russell Brothers, 1874), 37.

90. *Ibid.*, 38–39.

91. See further the commentary in J. Spencer Fluhman, “A *Peculiar People*”: *Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 21–48.

92. Charles Anthon to E. D. Howe, 17 February 1834, reprinted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:377–81; Charles Anthon to Thomas Winthrop Coit, 3 April 1841, reprinted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:382–86; Charles Anthon to William E. Vibbert, 12 August 1844, reprinted in Erin B. Jennings, “Charles Anthon — The Man Behind the Letters,” *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 32, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2012): 171–72.

93. Fluhman, “A *Peculiar People*,” 39.



of his deception.”<sup>94</sup> This fact highlights just how abjectly absurd and, yes, delusional Joseph’s claims seemed to those who did not accept the reality of his angelic interviews or the existence of ancient plates. Taves might insist that we narrow down the “culture or subculture” of belief to include basically only the Smith family and a handful of some close friends to accommodate her theory. But in that case why should anyone give the Smith family any more credence than the Manson family?

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

So far I have provided a critique of the IFT by directly challenging the arguments of its professors. I wish, however, to make several additional points. Let’s begin by asking a simple question: what is the purpose of the Book of Mormon? Why does the book exist? To answer this we turn to title page of the Book of Mormon, which Joseph Smith insisted was translated from the plates, and was not a modern composition.<sup>95</sup> According to the title page, the purpose of the Book of Mormon is threefold: (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.”

Focusing on this last purpose, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland affirmed,

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.<sup>96</sup>

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

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94. Ibid., 35.

95. Joseph Smith, History, 1838–1856, vol. A-1, *The Joseph Smith Papers* <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/40>.

96. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 4.

of the Nephite preaching and particularly their records, has been to declare this supremely important message.”<sup>97</sup> 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.

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’s 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.<sup>98</sup>

I can’t think of any New Testament scholar or any historian of Christianity or any faithful Christian, for that matter, who wouldn’t be ecstatic to find authentic extra-biblical sayings of Jesus. It would likely revolutionize our understanding of the life and teachings of Christ, as Elder Roberts recognized:

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97. Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 1:55.

98. John Watson, *Life of the Master* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1901), 7, quoted in B. H. Roberts, forward to *New Witnesses for God, vol. 2, The Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1909).

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.<sup>99</sup>

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. And not only that, it preserves a record of not just the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth but Jesus the exalted Christ.

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 authentic 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's 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 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 witness of the Book of Mormon carries none of the theological power it proclaims to have.

Those spoken of in the Book of Mormon are portrayed as real individuals who reaped witnessed miraculous blessings by exercising faith in Jesus Christ. Their stories are not presented as pious fiction, but as fact. "God has not ceased to be a God of miracles," Moroni declared.

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

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99. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 2:36–37.

changeth not; if so he would cease to be God; and he ceaseth not to be God, and is a God of miracles. (Moroni 9:16–19)

Marvelous indeed are these phony miracles narrated in the Book of Mormon if they never happened.

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 means 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 own similar promise that he shall meet his readers "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 fictional orphan Oliver Twist, the fictional Captain Ahab of the *Pequod*, or the fictional 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. But 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. 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.

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 “inspired” or “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 something of 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.<sup>100</sup>

Some might dismiss this stance as overly melodramatic, the pontifications of a dogmatic fundamentalist who lacks the prudence to read the Book of Mormon stripped of the crass literalism that shackles Mormon exegetes to a hermeneutic of naïveté and credulity. But the fact that lively debate surrounding 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 that attend 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 duty to expose the Book of Mormon for what it *really* is? The polemical strife which persists around the Book of Mormon forces us to ask the fundamental question: is this book what it claims to be? 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?

### **The Book of Mormon's Role in the Restoration**

Terryl Givens has looked closely at the role of the Book of Mormon in Joseph Smith's larger restoration project 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

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100. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant*, 345–46.

utterance, and thus an evidence of divine presence, before it is a repository of theological claims.<sup>101</sup>

Or, as Givens writes elsewhere, what outrages rival Christian denominations to this day isn't so much "its content [of the Book of Mormon]," which Christians could hardly object to, "but rather its manner of appearing; it has typically been judged not on the merits of what it *says*, but what it *enacts*."<sup>102</sup> 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 and seer than an unlearned frontiersman "[finding] through the ministration of an holy angel, and translat[ing] into our own language by the gift and power of God"<sup>103</sup> an ancient record written in "hieroglyphics, the knowledge of which was lost to the world"?<sup>104</sup> 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."<sup>105</sup>

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

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101. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 64, emphasis in original.

102. Terryl Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (New York.: Oxford University Press, 2009), 105, emphasis in original.

103. Joseph Smith, History, 1838–1856, vol. A-1, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/267>.

104. Joseph Smith, Letter to James Arlington Bennet, 13 November 1843, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-james-arlington-bennet-13-november-1843/2>.

105. Paul C. Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 61.

the Book of Mormon is true ... then one must accept the claims of the Restoration and all that accompanies it.<sup>106</sup>

Without the historicity of the Book of Mormon, both its contents and the manner of its coming forth, Joseph Smith has no genuine prophetic qualification. When the historicity of the Book of Mormon, and by implication the historicity of the Restoration, is sacrificed on the altar of the IFT, 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 religious imposter; at best well-meaning but deluded, 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.”<sup>107</sup> It *should* be obvious, but for some inexplicable reason this straightforward truth seems to elude proponents of the IFT.

### **Conclusion: “God’s actual entry into real history”**

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 provided in the pages of the book is authentic. The Book of Mormon, accordingly, must be historical and read as history in order for it to 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 its being an additional witness for the divinity of Jesus in any worthwhile sense is obliterated.

The Inspired Fiction Theory in all its present articulations obscures 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. The moment Joseph Smith claimed not only to be in the possession of physical golden plates given to him by a resurrected Nephite which he was able to translate by the gift and power of God, but also to have shown these plates to other witnesses is the moment he allowed himself no comfortable middle ground wherein we could divorce the historicity of these events from

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106. Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and a Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 18–19.

107. Daniel C. Peterson, “The Keystone of Our Religion,” BYU Maxwell Institute, accessed February 18, 2013, <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/transcripts/?id=25>.



Joseph’s prophetic credibility. Contrary to the contention of Loyd Ericson, “if it could be shown that the Book of Mormon was not a translation of an ancient text” the situation would not merely be one of reconfiguring our understanding of “its coming forth and the narratives surrounding it” but rather being logically compelled to dismiss Joseph Smith’s claims to prophetic inspiration.<sup>108</sup> To abandon faith in the historicity of the Book of Mormon is to effectively abandon — whether intentionally or not — faith in Joseph Smith’s sanity, honesty, and divine ordination.

To advance the IFT is to admit — unwillingly or not — that whatever else he was, Joseph Smith was a liar. No matter how much he’s masked with trivialized adjectives like *inspired* or *pious*, he deceived people into believing false claims. He either lied or was deluded in claiming the angel Moroni delivered real golden plates for him to translate. For any Latter-day Saint who takes the truth claims of the Church seriously, this concession should be totally unacceptable and vigorously rejected. For what the IFT asks Latter-day Saints 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.<sup>109</sup> He knew, as do millions of Saints throughout the world, that to abandon the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon is to see the arch of Latter-day Saint doctrine come tumbling down in a spectacular crash.

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*

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108. Loyd Ericson, “Conceptual Confusion and the Building of Stumbling Blocks of Faith,” in *Perspectives on Mormon Theology: Apologetics*, ed. Blair G. Van Dyke and Loyd Isao Ericson (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2017), 218.

109. Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1908), 4:461, extracted from Wilford Woodruff, Journal, November 28, 1841: “Joseph Said the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any Book on Earth & the key stone of our religion & a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts than by any other Book.”

(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.<sup>110</sup>

We conclude with the simple, sobering declaration of Joseph Smith himself, which directly underscores the point I’ve labored to make in the pages of this article: “Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations and where is our religion? We have none.”<sup>111</sup>

### Postscript: Answering Objections

When this paper originally appeared online in 2013, it generated lively discussion on the Interpreter Foundation blog and on other Latter-day Saint-themed blogs. I would be remiss if I did not at least briefly address a few of the more pressing objections which have been raised to my paper by commentators across the Internet.

*Insisting on the absurdity of the IFT belittles those who lack faith in Book of Mormon historicity but want to remain active in the Church.*

At no point in my paper have I questioned the sincerity of those who profess the IFT. Nor have I ever called for discipline against those who hold to such views while participating in the Church. I have, rather, striven to demonstrate the logical absurdity of the IFT and the dangerous implications I believe it has for what I believe is the core of Latter-day Saint faith if followed to its inevitable logical end. If individual members wish to remain active in the Church while holding to the IFT, I have no objection to such. I am not calling for any active Latter-day Saint who ascribes to the IFT to have his or her membership status called into question in any capacity. My admittedly adamant critique of an abstract ideology (the IFT) is not the same as my calling for members of the Church who may hold such views to resign their memberships or be ecclesiastically punished with disciplinary action.

*Grant Hardy has affirmed that one must not believe in Book of Mormon historicity to be saved. As such, he disagrees with Smoot on the imperative for Book of Mormon historicity.*

In a 2016 FairMormon Conference presentation, Grant Hardy spoke on the topic of “more effective apologetics” and offered thoughts on how Latter-day Saints might best defend the faith and answer sincere

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110. Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xv.

111. “Minutes and Discourse, 21 April 1834”, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-and-discourse-21-april-1834/2>.

questions from doubtful Church members.<sup>112</sup> During the question and answer portion of his presentation Hardy responded to questions about Book of Mormon historicity and the Inspired Fiction Theory thus:

Q. What about theories of the Book of Mormon as inspired fiction?

A. There are certainly problems with the historicity of the Book of Mormon, but the institutional Church can't and won't change. The historical claims of our Mormon scripture are more direct than those made by the Bible, and they are more central to the book's message — not just with regard to gold plates and angels, but also in the sense of bearing witness that God has a plan for human history, and that he intervenes rather dramatically from time to time (Christ appearing in the ancient Americas is very significant).

When people talk about “inspired fiction,” it's worth thinking harder about what they might mean. Perhaps that the Book of Mormon is a product of human genius, like other literary or religious works. Or it may be the product of general revelation, in which God or some higher power makes himself known to humans, who then communicate that encounter with the Divine through various scriptures such as Buddhist sutras or the Daodejing or the Bhagavad Gita or the Qur'an. Or there may be special revelation in which God inspired Joseph to create the Book of Mormon in such a way that it exemplifies specific truths of unique importance. In any case, however, we might ask, “Can faith in the Book of Mormon as inspired fiction be a saving faith?” My answer is, “Absolutely!” I believe that if someone at the judgment bar were to say to God, “I couldn't make sense of the Book of Mormon as an ancient American codex, given the available evidence, but I loved that book, I heard your voice in it, and I tried to live by its precepts as best I could,” then God will respond, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

For me, I expect to see the resurrected Nephi and Moroni at the judgment bar. It matters to me that they are real individuals. At the same time, I'm not sure that God will

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112. Grant Hardy, “More Effective Apologetics,” (Presentation, FairMormon Conference, Provo, UT, August 4-5, 2016), <https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2016/more-effective-apologetics>.

ask, “Did you believe the right things about the Trinity, Joseph Smith, the plan of salvation, and the nature of revelation,” let alone my opinions about polygamy, same-sex marriage, blacks and the priesthood, women’s ordination, politics, or Mormon history. Rather, I believe he will say, “Were you my disciple? Did you strive to know me better? Were you constantly trying to refine your ideas and actions in light of your growing understanding? Were you fully engaged in the Church? How did you treat those with different beliefs and values? And by the way, you were wrong on a number of things you felt strongly about.”

I believe that at the judgment day, when Mormons and ex-Mormons, Jews and Christians, Hindus and Buddhists, Muslims and Sikhs, agnostics and atheists are gathered together, we’re all going to be surprised in one way or another. In fact, I’m sure of it. If I’m not surprised, that would be a huge surprise.<sup>113</sup>

I actually agree with Hardy that, speaking strictly in terms of soteriology, affirming faith in the historicity of the Book of Mormon is not a prerequisite for salvation. The imperative of which I speak is not necessarily an intrinsically soteriological one, but rather a logical one which carries implications for whether one should have faith in Joseph Smith’s soteriology to begin with. Said another way, I am arguing that there is a logical imperative to believe Joseph Smith’s account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon if you’re going to give his subsequent claims about the nature of God, Christ, salvation, and eschatology any credence at all. It logically does not make sense to profess that Joseph Smith’s soteriology is true when the claimed prophetic or revelatory foundation underlying the truthfulness of that soteriology is predicated on the reality of his most important truth claims. To put it simply: I am asking why we should for one moment believe anything Joseph Smith claimed about God and the fate of the human soul if his foundational truth claims are fraudulent.

Beyond this point, I disagree somewhat with Hardy when he says that affirming a correct religious worldview is irrelevant to individual salvation. The passages quoted above from Nephi and Moroni (2 Nephi 33:10-15; Moroni 10:27-29) make it clear that at the judgment there will be an accounting for whether the individual accepted or rejected the teachings of Book of Mormon prophets. This is especially true with regard to the

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113. Ibid.

Book of Mormon's prophetic teachings concerning the nature of Jesus Christ and his gospel. So while I agree with Hardy when he stresses that the judgment will take into account not just ideological loyalty but also personal moral behavior, I feel like downplaying the importance of intellectually or mentally assenting to revealed truth which results in adherence to the principles and ordinances of the gospel should be avoided.

*God is known elsewhere in scripture to utilize divine deception to impress certain points on the minds of believers (e.g., Doctrine and Covenants 19:5–12), so He therefore may have done the same by revealing a fictional Book of Mormon to Joseph Smith.*

This objection fails on two counts. First, the issue with D&C 19:5–12 is not one of divine deception but rather divine equivocation. Equivocating the meaning of a word or phrase such as *endless torment* or *eternal damnation* “that it might work upon the hearts of the children of men” (v. 7) is not the same as outright falsehood. In this instance, God affirms that “endless torment” and “eternal damnation” do in fact exist, just not the way most Bible readers have thought because of their faulty reading of scripture which God left uncorrected for rhetorical effect. This is emphatically not the same thing as if God were to blatantly lie to someone by, say, conjuring illusory hallucinations of a resurrected Nephite angel and ancient golden plates in the mind said individual.

Second, this objection takes for granted that D&C 19:5–12, which was communicated by Joseph Smith in the summer of 1829, is in fact an authentic revelation from a higher power. But by the time Joseph Smith communicated this revelation he had been claiming to friends and family visitations of the angel Moroni for at least six years and had been claiming to have in his possession the golden plates for nearly two years. If Joseph was lying or deluded about his visitations with a non-existent Moroni for six years and his custody of non-existent or non-ancient plates for two years, then why should we take seriously for even one moment his word that this revelation came from God?

*If the Book of Mormon must be read historically, then all scripture must be read historically to be consistent.*

The main problem with this counter-argument is that it fails to take into consideration the importance of scriptural genre. Said briefly, literary scholars, including biblical literary scholars, emphasize that not all scriptural writings are the same category or genre of writing. Some purport to be historical narrative, some myth, others poetry, and others prophecy. The goal of the literary critic, and by extension the biblical critic at large, is to identify and classify which genre(s) a given scriptural text

falls under.<sup>114</sup> Such is of utmost importance in determining how to exegete and read the text. As such, one would not read a biblical poem or myth the same way one would read historical annals. Different interpretive tools or methods must be enlisted to properly read these different genres.

Insisting that *all* scripture be uniformly read as the same thing or in the same manner is fallacious. One would not read the opening chapters of Genesis the same way one would read the opening chapters of 2 Kings or the opening lines of the book of Revelation or the opening section of the Doctrine and Covenants. So too with the Book of Mormon. Nephi's narrative preserved in his small plates should not be read the same way as Zenos's allegory preserved in Jacob 5 or Christ's sermons in 3 Nephi. As I have demonstrated at great length, as an overall comprehensive literary entity the Book of Mormon principally purports to be a historical narrative, even though subgenres (poetry, allegory, epic, and myth) are at times embedded within this narrative to draw out theological and moral points. This is why we may insist on reading the Book of Mormon as history while making no such insistence for, say, the book of Proverbs or the Creation account(s) in Genesis or other portions of scripture which do not purport to be history but rather something else.

*Insisting on the imperative for a historical Book of Mormon is unhelpful or unreasonable because such applies a double standard to the Book of Mormon which one would not hold to other scripture.*

An online satirical article titled "The Imperative for a Historical Book of Deuteronomy" aims to refute my thesis by using a sort of *argumentum ad absurdum*.<sup>115</sup> The anonymous author of this piece means to demonstrate "that if we were to apply the same standards that are applied in his article for the Book of Mormon toward other scripture, like Deuteronomy for example, the arguments will not hold and other scriptures that are found to be non-historical will be dropped by those accepting the methods given in Smoot's article." The author of the article insists that "Historical criticism over the last few hundred years has shown beyond a shadow of a doubt that Moses did not write Deuteronomy, but was in fact written between 640 BCE and 550 BCE," and so asks if in

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114. Richard N. and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 4th ed. (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 74.

115. Anonymous, "The Imperative for a Historical Book of Deuteronomy," Worlds With End (blog), December 10, 2013, <http://www.withoutend.org/imperative-historical-book-deuteronomy/>.

fact “[the Book of Deuteronomy must] possess historicity ... in order to convey spiritual truth.”<sup>116</sup>

As clever as this article is (and I truly do appreciate its tongue-in-cheek novelty), it is wholly fallacious. For all his or her cleverness, the anonymous author of this piece did not stop to consider that attempts to compare the claimed authorship and recovery of Deuteronomy with that of the Book of Mormon are misguided on several points. David Larsen, a personal friend and colleague of mine, has recognized this. At the risk of being accused of intellectual sloth, inasmuch as I agree with every point he makes in his rebuttal, I reproduce his comment here in full:

There is very little that can be appropriately compared between Joseph’s claim that the Book of Mormon is an ancient record that he, himself, translated and the ancient tradition that Deuteronomy was written by Moses. We have Joseph Smith’s own statements on the matter, as well as those of his family and friends. We have no such statements from Moses or from the so-called Deuteronomists. We have no way of knowing who originally authored [Deuteronomy]. We have no witnesses that can claim to have seen Moses as he was writing the book or dictating it, nor any who have seen the original manuscript. So it does no good to call Moses a liar, nor the Deuteronomists or the Jews who later received the text. We can assume that someone, at some time, made claims that were not entirely truthful regarding the authorship of the text or parts of the text, but we could not blame later readers for being ignorant of the actual process of how things went down. But with the Book of Mormon, the story is completely different. Unlike with Deuteronomy, we do have a certain degree of access to the man that brought us this text. As far as I understand the matter, Joseph Smith did believe and teach that the Book of Mormon was of ancient origin. One perhaps could argue that Joseph was misled and that Moroni gave him a golden book that was not really of ancient origin but was an amalgamation of modern sources inscribed on gold plates (or insert your favorite theory), but you would have to then either argue that Moroni, a messenger from God, was being deceptive or that Joseph Smith himself made the whole thing up or was lying about many parts of the story. To me,

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116. Ibid.

there is a difference between ancient pseudepigraphal texts and what they may be able to offer as far as spiritual and life lessons, and a modern prophet claiming to have had visions and being given a text through the gift and power of God. As Latter-day Saints, there is no real imperative to take all of the Bible and its claims as literal, historical or “true.” The claims of Joseph Smith regarding the Book of Mormon, however, are a completely different matter to us, theologically, and cannot be lumped together with books of the Bible. Perhaps for someone trained in biblical studies the difference might seem a technical one, but for believing Latter-day Saints, the difference is like night and day.

I would also point out that we do not necessarily need to see malicious intent in the ascription of Deuteronomy to Moses. There could be various reasons that individuals would want to attribute the book to Moses, but if you look at the case of some of the Psalms that are assigned to David, in the end I think that some of these authorial attributions are based simply on later editors’ beliefs, assumptions, and ignorance regarding the actual author of an older text. I’m not saying that this is the case with Deuteronomy, but we do see later redactors adding names into the text where they did not previously exist.

In the Church, we are encouraged to pray to God to gain a witness of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and one of the book’s ancient authors promises that we will receive a response. There is no such promise made for the Book of Deuteronomy, neither within its pages or from modern prophets. I don’t imagine that Jewish proselytes are encouraged to pray about the Book of Deuteronomy in this way. I do not mean, with this statement, to diminish anyone’s belief in Deuteronomy or in any other part of the Bible. This is a statement regarding the spiritual witness promised specifically in the Book of Mormon. In my mind, I equate reading the words of claimed ancient prophets and then praying to know if those words are true with a historical Book of Mormon. I do not feel — and this is my opinion and understanding — that God would give a witness of the truth of a book that merely claimed to be historical but was not. If the entire premise of the book was



a fabrication, I do not imagine that God would be in the business of confirming to people that the book was true.<sup>117</sup>

The biblical narrative describing the coming forth of the “book of the law” (Deuteronomy) during the reign of king Josiah is detailed in 2 Kings 22–23. If our anonymous author would kindly point to where this account claims from firsthand, personal experience that a resurrected Moses hand-delivered the scroll of the text he personally composed to the pious Josiah, who subsequently translated the scroll by means of supernatural aid, then I might be inclined to give the article some consideration. Until that time, the point our mysterious satirist tries but fails to make with this piece is unworthy of any further serious consideration.

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117. David Larsen, December 10, 2013, comment on Anonymous, “The Imperative for a Historical Book of Deuteronomy.”