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Bamboozled by the CES Letter

Author(s): Michael R. Ash

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Abstract: In April 2013 Jeremy T. Runnells published a PDF booklet entitled, “Letter to a CES Director.” This booklet, which is now typically referred to as the “CES Letter,” catalogs Runnells’ concerns and reason why he left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Runnells has worked hard to make his booklet available to people everywhere (and in several languages) and has, unfortunately, been the agent for leading at least a few other believers out of Mormonism.

Sadly, most of those who have been bamboozled by the “CES Letter” are Latter-day Saints who were blind-sided by scholarly-sounding interpretations of challenging data. In my opinion, however, the “CES Letter” creates a caricature of Mormonism. The arguments are fundamentally flawed and do not accurately represent either Mormonism or the only logical interpretations of the data.

“Bamboozled by the ‘CES Letter’” explains why these controversial issues need not kill a testimony. Interpretation matters. Many lay members, as well as educated Mormon scholars, are fully aware of every topic discussed in the “CES Letter” but continue strong in their faith because they recognize that there are logical interpretations which can be integrated with their belief in Mormonism. There are answers to the concerns raised by the “CES Letter,” and those answers can be supported by current scholarship as well as harmonized with the acceptance of Mormon truth claims.

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by the
“CES Letter”

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Self-Published in Electronic Format by the Author

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While many of the views expressed in this book are shared by others, and some of these views have been articulated by authors more eloquent than myself, I nevertheless claim singular responsibility for the thoughts, ideas, and interpretations as they are presented in this book. I do not speak for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or any other organization, and I take sole credit for any and all mistakes.

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- 2) *The KJV italicized English words were added to the Bible to make it more readable. Why does the Book of Mormon include those italicized words?*
- 3) *The Book of Mormon includes mistranslated biblical passages that were later changed in the Joseph Smith Translation [JST] of the Bible. These Book of Mormon verses should match the inspired JST version instead of the incorrect KJV version that Joseph later fixed.*
- 4) *DNA analysis has concluded that Native Americans do not originate from the Middle East or from Israelites but rather from Asia.*
- 5) *Horses, cattle, oxen, sheep, swine, goats, elephants, wheels, chariots, wheat, silk, steel, and iron did not exist in pre-Columbian America during Book of Mormon times. Why are these things mentioned in the Book of Mormon as being made available in the Americas between 2200 BC - 421 AD?*
- 6) *Absolutely no archaeological evidence has ever been discovered to directly support the Book of Mormon or the millions of Book of Mormon peoples who lived in the New World.*
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- 8) *The New World Archaeological Foundation (NWAFF) was created in the 1950s & 60s by the Church in order to find evidence for the Book of Mormon.*
- 9) *The Book of Mormon contains proper nouns (people and place names) that are strikingly similar to city names found in Joseph Smith’s environment.*
- 10) *View of the Hebrews (first published in 1823) tells a story remarkably similar to the one told in the Book of Mormon (published in 1830).*
- 11) *Critics like to claim that Elder B.H. Roberts (a member of the Quorum of the Seventy in the late 1800s) faltered in his testimony, in part, because of a study he wrote detailing supposed parallels between the Book of Mormon and View of the Hebrews.*
- 12) *The Late War Between the United States and Great Britain, was an 1819 textbook written in KJV style language for New York state school children including, possibly, Joseph Smith. The book uses similar language to what is found in the Book of Mormon—including phrases like “it came to pass,” “rod of iron,” “curious workmanship,” and a “stripling” soldier.*

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- 92) *The author of the CES Letter looked for answers on official church sites but couldn't find any.*
- 93) *FairMormon, a group made up of unofficial LDS apologists [defenders of the faith], do more harm than good and have driven people out of the Church.*

Endnotes

Chapter 1 A Caricature of the Church

“You’re killing me, Smalls” (Ham Porter, *The Sandlot*).

“Operation Mincemeat”

On April 30, 1943, a fisherman off the coast of Spain spotted a badly decomposed body floating in the ocean. The corpse was pulled aboard. The man’s uniform pegged him as a British officer in the Royal Marines and the contents of his wallet identified him as Major William Martin. Curiously, Martin’s cadaver still had an attaché case handcuffed to his wrist. Because this all took place smack in the middle of WWII, the fisherman was quick to turn the body and the still-attached briefcase over to the authorities.

When the authorities pried open the attaché case they discovered top secret military documents that discussed Allied plans to invade Greece and Sardinia. Eventually the papers were given to the Germans who examined the documents and mobilized their military to defend against the Allied attack.

The Germans, however, had been bamboozled. The body’s identity and the contents of the man’s wallet and attaché case were a ruse—a hoax cleverly created by the British intelligence with input from Ian Fleming (the creator of the James Bond stories). “Major Martin” was, in reality, a homeless man who had been found dead in an abandoned warehouse. The deceased man had no immediate family and had died from eating rat poison (either by suicide or from hunger).

British intelligence created a very real identity with bogus but persuasive possessions for their Trojan Horse. Major Martin’s personal possessions included fictitious ticket stubs, unpaid bills, a letter from an imaginary father, and a photo of his imaginary fiancé. Martin’s body had no signs of bruises and it appeared that he had drowned in the sea. All the evidence suggested that Major Martin was this man’s real identity and that the documents he was carrying were authentic Top Secret British war-planning documents. The Germans were wrong; the ploy—dubbed “Operation Mincemeat”—worked, and the Allies pushed through Sicily where resistance was minimal.

Just as the corpse of Major Martin bamboozled the Germans, so likewise the CES Letter has bamboozled a number of Latter-day Saints. Both are scams that cleverly rely on not only subterfuge but they strategically maneuver *real data* to create evidence for a story they want their targets to believe. The man was a real human who died; the photo of the woman in the wallet was of a real young lady; the attaché case was real; the handcuff was real. In the case of the CES Letter most of the points of data discussed are real as well. Like Major Martin’s story, the CES Letter looks real and reasonable on the surface and seems to be verified by science and scholarship. Both, however, are mere illusions—admittedly clever illusions—which have fooled critical thinkers and skeptics as well as laypersons.

“By Grabthar’s Hammer, by the suns of Worvan, you shall be avenged.” (Sir Alexander Dane, *Galaxy Quest*)

In an effort to help those Latter-day Saints who have been troubled by the information discussed in the CES Letter, this brief booklet intends to show the real character behind the illusion. I assume the reader is already familiar with the contents and claims of the CES Letter and I don’t plan to address each accusation in great depth—this has already been done by my associates at FairMormon.org (see this page for detailed discussions of each topic or a new FairMormon “Closer Look” at the CES Letter here). For those of you who don’t know FairMormon, it’s an all-volunteer organization (of which I am proudly a member) dedicated to helping Latter-day Saints who are struggling with the faith or for investigators who are searching for *our side* of the story when it comes to challenging issues.

I’ve also engaged most of these topics to a much greater degree in my book *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One’s Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt* and I’ve also pointed out the many evidences which support a position of belief in my book *Of Faith and Reason: 80 Evidences Supporting the Prophet Joseph Smith*.

This booklet responds to some of the more egregious problems with the CES Letter’s interpretation of the data and also demonstrates that there is room to understand these topics from within a framework that accepts modern prophets, the restoration, and divine influence in recording and preserving the scriptures. Because this is a relatively small book, I did not include a lot of endnotes (like I typically do in my other books or my on-line articles)—I tried to keep this brief and easy. I also tried to keep it light—at least as light as possible considering the nature of the overall subject. The general topic is, of course, serious.

I believe that Christ stands at the head of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, that it is led by a prophet, and that the scriptures are divinely inspired writings that help us return to God. Productions like the CES Letter concern me because I know they can create heartburn in the spiritual stomachs of some members—this is going to happen when you eat a habanero pepper that you thought was a cherry tomato. If we take some *Prilosec* and remove the pepper seeds, however, the pepper may no longer burn. Likewise I’ve found that preventative measures (or inoculation—teaching the hard stuff in faithful settings) and pulling the teeth from the bite (demonstrating that the strength of the critics’ arguments are weak at best) can protect, restore, or even strengthen a testimony.

Although I recognize the seriousness of this issue, I can’t but wonder if God has a sense of humor. Joseph Smith had a great sense of humor; so did President Kimball, and so does President Uchtdorf. While I strictly avoid making light of serious and sacred topics, I can’t help but poke a little fun at our human natures when we think, argue, or discuss some of these serious topics. In my defense of the Church, I hope my attempts at humor don’t offend any readers (...of course maybe they should—isn’t the saying, “the best defense is a good offense”?)

First, a couple of important general points:

It's easier to make an accusation than to refute an accusation.

According to some conspiracy theorists, the Moon Landing was a hoax and they claim that photos supposedly taken on the Moon support their theory. Photos taken of the Earth, for example, don't show stars in the background. Photos of the American flag on the Moon show a banner in mid-flap despite the fact that there is no air on the Moon. In one photo a Moon rock appears to have the letter "C" stamped on the side—an obvious sign that this was simply one of many stage props. There are cogent and logical answers to these claims, but it takes many more pages of ink to explain why these evidences have no merit than it takes to make the accusations in the first place. The same is true with the charges against LDS beliefs. It's easy to make a quip, snippet, or to write a couple of paragraphs which claim to destroy the beliefs held by others, but it takes a lot more effort and explanation to counter such claims.

Smart people don't always agree with each other.

There are smart atheists, Baptists, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, and yes, Mormons. Smart people don't always agree—in fact, they often disagree. There are, for example, also smart Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, and even Communists. You might think that the other guy or gal is an idiot. You may be convinced that they don't have a clue about how the real world works or what is best for our country—and you may have good arguments to support your convictions—but the reasons you maintain your views and reject theirs are typically not because you are smarter than they are.

Intelligent people can all agree that $2+2=4$, that water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit, and that a dropped rock will fall toward your toes. Intelligence and rationale are not enough alone, however, to determine that there is or isn't a God, that the Bible was written by divinely inspired prophets, or that Joseph Smith communed with God and translated an ancient American record. There is no silver bullet to kill all other arguments and no universally acceptable "proof" that will convince all people that one position trumps all others. Psychologists and neuroscientists tell us that we don't always think purely rational thoughts or that all most of our decision making—even on important life-changing issues—is determined by sheer intelligence. And we can't escape this problem because it's simply part of our human nature.

Which brings us to our next issue....

The strength of evidence is often a matter of interpretation.

In the late 1980s and 90s various individuals and groups distributed information requesting that concerned citizens sign a petition to ban the use of *dihydrogen monoxide*. This compound, they accurately explained, is a major component of acid rain, industrial solvents, and fire retardants. If inhaled—even in small quantities—it can lead to death. Its gaseous form can cause severe burns, and prolonged exposure to solid dihydrogen monoxide can cause severe tissue damage. It leads to soil erosion and oxidation of many metals, and is often found in the biopsies

of pre-cancerous tumors and lesions. In modern times it has been discovered in both city sewage waste systems and city aqueducts which supply drinking water.

One molecule of dihydrogen monoxide is composed of two hydrogen atoms and a single oxygen atom, with the chemical formula of H_2O —more commonly known as “water.” That’s right, dihydrogen monoxide is *water*. Various individuals and groups have taken advantage of the lesser known, more scientific-sounding name to prank the gullible public. The fact is, that all of the negative aspects about water—noted above—are true. No right-minded person would ban the use of water, but they could be fooled into signing a petition to ban dihydrogen monoxide if they were duped by only looking at its negative aspects.

Critics, including those who created the CES Letter, similarly spin an overall negative picture of the Church by only listing what they see as the negative aspects of Mormonism (which, as my booklet will show, are debatable). Not only is the overall picture framed in bad light, but each individual accusation is interpreted and presented in the most negative way possible in the hopes that they will be able to accrue enough unfavorable features about Mormonism—like the list of negative qualities of dihydrogen monoxide—that someone who doesn’t know better will accept those interpretations as representative of the big picture.

There are often various ways to look at different problems, data, or research. These differing perspectives often yield different conclusions. Now, to clarify, I’m not claiming that all truth is relative. I believe that there are a great number of absolute truths. The Earth is nearly spherical, gravity (in ways we don’t fully understand yet) is responsible for dropping things on your toes and making aging body parts sag. It’s not arguable that the United States had a past president named John F. Kennedy who was assassinated. There are debates, however, that question if *every* political position he pursued was in the best interest of the country.

I’m a firm believer that there were actual Lehitites that traversed the Arabian Peninsula and eventually came to the Americas. I think that there are some very suggestive evidences from archaeology and anthropology which correlate well with the Book of Mormon. Critics do not, of course, agree with the strength of the evidences. Critics believe that there are some very suggestive evidences from nineteenth-century American history which correlate well with the view that Joseph Smith was a fraud. I find such evidences to be weak and ultimately unconvincing.

Sometimes powerful evidence doesn’t have any real impact on someone’s acceptance or rejection of a proposition. Some criminals—even those who were guilty of heinous crimes—have been set free because they had good lawyers who knew how to impeach powerfully damning evidence against their client. Likewise, in the past decade a number of men who had previously been convicted for murder or rape have been released from prison because modern DNA evidence has vindicated them.

It’s not that intelligent people hide their heads in the sand when presented with evidence, but rather that in life there are evidences that point “to” as well as “away” from a number of issues. We rarely have “proof” for the things we believe to be true. We are forced to interpret evidence based on what we see as the strength of the evidence, as well as how it fits other evidences, and also how it answers conflicting evidences.

Fans of the CES Letter like to crow about instances where those who defend Mormonism agree with their arguments. The creators of the CES Letter, in fact, claim that FairMormon disagrees with only 21% of the CES Letter. Because, according to their calculations, FairMormon remains neutral on 51% of the letter and agrees with 28% of the letter, tacitly FairMormon agrees with 79% of the CES Letter.

Such a conclusion is, quite frankly, astounding and it's hard to understand how anyone could take such a declaration seriously. It is, unfortunately, taken seriously by a number of believers and skeptics thanks to some clever sleight of hand (see the "Mincemeat Operation" above). When I wore a younger man's clothes (for you Billy Joel fans) I liked to play with magic—card tricks, coin tricks, etc. I was never really good at it, but it *was* a lot of fun. Even a mediocre magician can fool very intelligent people with a bit of misdirection and carefully planned maneuvers.

CES Letter devotees also argue that FairMormon agrees 100% with the CES Letter's section pointing out that Joseph Smith used a rock in a hat to translate the Book of Mormon (see #15 below). But is that *all* that is claimed by the CES Letter in regards to the Book of Mormon translation process? Does the CES Letter state or imply that the Book of Mormon is the Word of God, translated by a prophet *who used a rock in a hat*? No, of course not. Instead, the CES Letter *interprets* the "rock in the hat" as proof of fraud. The CES Letter, for example, states:

In other words, he [Joseph Smith] used the same "Ouija Board" that he used in his days treasure hunting....

...I'm now supposed to believe that Joseph has the credibility of translating the keystone Book of Mormon? With a rock in a hat?

...And I'm supposed to believe with a straight face that Joseph using a rock in a hat is totally legit? Despite this being the exact same method he used to con people out of their money during his treasure hunting days?

You see, the CES Letter is not just a laundry list of facts, of data that speaks for itself. The CES Letter interprets the data as evidence for the overall conclusion it is trying to promote—that the Church is false. In the conclusion of the CES Letter we read how this data is interpreted:

We're talking about dozens of serious issues that undermine the very foundation of the LDS Church and its truth claims.

According to the CES Letter the interpretation of the data "undermine[s]" the truth claims of Mormonism. Do you suppose that FairMormon *agrees* with this interpretation? If not, then why would the CES Letter claim to have such high percentages wherein FairMormon *agrees* with the CES Letter? Quite frankly those responsible for claiming that FairMormon agrees with 79% of the CES Letter should be embarrassed.

No serious scholar would (I hope) confuse *data* with *interpretation of data*. A number of people whom I count as my friends (and I think they feel the same about me) are critics of the

Church. Many of these critics are scholars in their own right. They have done the necessary research and have tried—as best as humanly possible—to apply scholarly methods to their works. I would be shocked if they would concede that FairMormon *agrees* with 79% of the CES Letter. They would accurately understand that FairMormon might agree with 79% of the data (if that is even a realistic number) but would differ significantly on the *interpretation of the data*.

Carol walks into her apartment and sees their neighbor Kyle kneeling over the bloody corpse of her husband Tom. Kyle is also covered in blood and has a knife in his hand. *That* is the data. Did Kyle kill Tom? *That* is the interpretation of the data. While it certainly appears that Kyle stabbed Tom to death, Kyle claims that he heard screams, ran over and found Tom lying on the floor dying with a knife sticking out of his chest. Kyle instinctively pulled out the knife, got sprayed with blood, and was in the act of desperately trying to save Tom's life when Carol walked in. Carol remains unconvinced. Kyle didn't like Tom. She's sure that Kyle committed the murder.

Which interpretation is the most accurate? That depends on other information that may come from outside of the original data—and that's why we have courts and trials to ascertain which interpretation is more accurate. If Carol and Kyle went to court because they both had different interpretations of the murder, would it be fair and honest to say that the defense *agreed* with the prosecution? They both would agree on the data but would disagree on the interpretation of the data.

The majority of the topics addressed in the CES Letter are issues involving historical inquiry—they are issues about past events, comments, and actions of early LDS leaders. We can't see into the past. We *must* interpret the data of the past in order to construct a picture of what was taking place. The late Dr. Edward W. Said, a one-time professor at Columbia University, once explained:

All knowledge that is about human society, and not about the natural world, is historical knowledge, and therefore rests upon judgment and interpretation. This is not to say that facts or data are nonexistent, but that facts get their importance from what is made of them in interpretation. ...For interpretations depend very much on who the interpreter is, who he or she is addressing, what his or her purpose is in interpreting, at what historical moment the interpretation takes place.¹

When the CES Letter makes outrageous claims—like that FairMormon agrees with 79% of the CES Letter—they show, in my opinion, their absolute lack of objectivity or acumen. I can see only two reasons they would make such a bogus claim: 1) They rely on blatant and willful legerdemain (sleight of hand) or 2) Their overconfidence exhibits naïve and uninformed exuberance. Perhaps there is another option but it's hard to imagine one. Neither of these two options—duplicity or incompetence—offers much confidence in the scholarly conclusions of the CES Letter.

Because I like to consider the best in people's motives, my suspicion leans to academic ineptitude. It should quickly be noted that ineptitude doesn't necessarily mean that all conclusions or arguments are automatically to be rejected—bad arguments can be formed to support true conclusions and good arguments can lead to erroneous conclusions—but it should, at least, suggest

that readers apply a bit of skepticism before swallowing whole the arguments presented in the CES Letter.

The peril of black and white assumptions.

Every person makes assumptions every single day because we don't have the time or energy to examine every single piece of data that comes our way. The brain of every normal human is wired to make quick and automatic decisions in order to navigate through life. This automatic process leads us to look for patterns. Visually, black and white patterns are very easy to see—there is a distinct and sharp boundary between the opposing shades of contrast.

The innate pattern-seeking process of our brains extends beyond things we see, however. We also automatically seek patterns to help us understand more complex things in our lives, such as stories, theories, and beliefs. Because we are not naturally aware that we form our thoughts on these patterns, we don't typically realize that many of our thoughts are instinctively categorized in black and white patterns as well.

“I've never eaten sushi before, but I had it for lunch yesterday and got sick that night. The sushi made me sick.” While it's possible that the sushi was responsible for making you sick, it's also possible that you got food poisoning from the ice cream you had with your friends after eating the sushi. Or maybe you actually had a 24-hour stomach virus. Your brain, however, automatically sees a black and white pattern: Sushi is a new food to your stomach; your stomach got sick; ergo, sushi is bad.

Unfortunately, this habit of thinking in black and white instinctively rides shotgun in our brains even when we contemplate topics with more sophisticated data, such as sports, politics, or religion. When we apply black and white assumptions to matters of greater importance, we often take an either/or stand without realizing that the truth may lie somewhere in-between.

The scriptures are true, the prophet speaks the Word of God, and faith can move mountains. These things are all true, but they are not completely true—there are degrees of subtlety and nuance to each of these and many more gospel topics. What does it mean to say that the “scriptures are true?” Does this mean that every letter, word, idea, story, and historical perspective is 100% factually precise and conveys fully and literally all the information the reader needs to know without any ambiguity? If not, where is the line? Is it a hardline or a line that changes according to scriptural author, time frame, and context?

From my observation, black and white thinking typically stems from an absence of information. This doesn't mean we're dumb; it just means that we can't be experts on everything. All of us are less informed on a great number of things, otherwise we'd all be trying to get on the game show *Jeopardy*.

Not only does every human make instinctive black and white assumptions that can lead to misunderstandings, but unfortunately, most people (and especially most Americans) are not really knowledgeable about history. Poll after poll has shown that Americans are, in general, sadly unfamiliar with some of the more important events in not only American history, but also world

history. The problem extends to the average Latter-day Saint when it comes to Church history. Many of us are familiar with the basic historical accounts taught in Church, or in Seminary, or in Institute classes, but relatively few Latter-day Saints have really taken much interest in pursuing the greater historical knowledge that comes from more in-depth historical studies (many of which are produced by Church-sponsored organizations or by believing and faithful members).

When dealing with testimonies and testimony crisis I have found that testimony damage is not necessarily brought on by additional information by itself, but rather by a barrage of negatively-interpreted information that is added to our data banks when we don't have all the information and assume that things can be viewed in black and white. The defense for a damaged testimony is not less information, but actually *more information*. As Joseph Smith said, "I have always had the satisfaction of seeing the truth triumph over error, and darkness give way before light."²

The Devil is in the details

As the Swamp Castle King says in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, "This is supposed to be a happy occasion. Let's not bicker and argue about who killed who." It would be wonderful if I didn't feel a need to write a book like this; I could spend more time hiking and taking pictures. Unfortunately, however, it's a fact that life is hard. People get hurt, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

I don't doubt that the author of the CES Letter is sincere and believes that the Church is false. His story, sadly, is not unique. He discovered troubling information that sent his religious worldviews into a downward spiral. The arguments listed in the CES Letter indicate that this author, like many people in the world today, instinctively approached his beliefs from within a black and white framework. This framework unfortunately created a stumbling block to an accurate assessment of the troubling issues and ultimately contributed to a collapse in testimony.

Hurt by feelings of betrayal, and believing that the Church had lied, the author probably created the CES Letter with sincere hopes of helping other people get out of the same situation. As discussed in #1, however, facts don't speak for themselves. They must be interpreted, and the CES Letter seems to intentionally twist every interpretation to maximize a negative portrayal of the Church. Unwary members who haven't yet entertained a religious worldview that sees the various shades of gray in understanding prophets as mere mortals with divinely-called positions, can be conned, scammed, bamboozled, and victimized by a storm of scholarly-sounding negative interpretations that seem to undercut their beliefs.

From my experience there will be at least four different reactions from those who read the CES Letter. Some will roll their eyes and believe that the Letter spews anti-Mormon nonsense. Their testimonies will be unscathed. For some, curiosity will be piqued but they will not (at least not immediately) diverge from their normal course. Their testimonies might feel a tremor or may later become shaken. Others will have hearts broken and, believing the worst, will exit the Church (either officially or unofficially). Their testimonies will be shattered. Finally, members like myself will react with dismay—not dismay for ourselves, but dismay for those who lose their path because they can't see through the mists of darkness created by the CES Letter.

For most people, the accusations in the CES Letter come out of the blue—they are new, troubling discoveries which create spiritual and intellectual heartburn. For people like me, the CES Letter doesn't shed any new light on Mormon topics—it's all old claims that have been around for decades if not longer. Old arguments are obviously not, by definition, impotent arguments. The very fact that the CES Letter has damaged at least a few testimonies demonstrates that, for many members, these topics still can pack a wallop.

I wish I didn't have to "bicker and argue about who killed who," but because I'm among those who have seen all of this stuff before I feel obligated to share my thoughts. People like me have had our turn at the heartburn, but came to recognize that the information by itself—left uninterrupted by critics—does not demand that we resign our beliefs. Having recognized that there is more to the story, we have discovered that we didn't always have a clear understanding of Mormon teachings or Mormon history. We've come to learn that—when it comes to understanding history as well as human interaction with God—there is more gray than black and white.

This doesn't mean that the Gospel is gray or complicated. On the contrary. The Gospel is simple and is adapted to all who desire to taste of God's goodness—even if they are weak in mind or spirit. The Gospel is simple so that those who desire, who put their faith in God, can feel the Spirit even if they are unable to understand or explain why the plates were written on metal, or why Joseph was commanded to practice plural marriage, or why Moses cursed the Egyptians with plagues. The Gospel is simple because the rest of the stuff can be confusing and ambiguous.

The gray areas inconvenience our understanding of history, of human cognitive skills, of motives, assumptions, and of the weaknesses inherent among all humankind. My worldview—my paradigm—allows for the humanness of prophets as well as the divine hand of God in guiding those prophets. In fact, when understood properly, I believe this awareness can aide us in understanding how God works through imperfect mortals such as ourselves. This amazing and joyful news gives hope that there is salvation even for a "wretch like me" (*Amazing Grace*).

So in the next chapter I'll begin examining most of the claims made in the CES Letter—and please remember that this is a *booklet*. In the interest of space and the desire to hopefully keep readers from dozing off, I'll touch only briefly on each topic. Before I get into a point by point examination, however, I need to point out a few caveats of my own:

1) My numbering system is not the same as the numbering system in the CES Letter. I've tried to follow the same flow as we find in the CES Letter but I've also discovered two things about the number of concerns (or supposed problems) listed in the CES Letter:

2) At the time of this writing, The CES Letter lists 14 primary "Concerns" about Mormonism. Each of these primary categories has multiple sub-category concerns. Some of these subcategory concerns include concerns within the text that are not necessarily numbered. I've tried to answer the majority of unique concerns discussed in the letter.

3) A number of the subcategory or individual concerns within each subcategory are repeated multiple times in the CES Letter. It's hard not to see this as intentional. The same issues are mentioned sometimes back to back, or repeated again later in the letter. It gives the illusion

(intentionally or unintentionally) that there are many more troubling issues (or more evidence for troubling issues) than we might find if we pared down the unique arguments and evidences. "...at the *Derek Zoolander Center For Kids Who Can't Read Good And Wanna Learn To Do Other Stuff Good Too*, we teach you that there's more to life than just being really, really, really good looking" (as if more than one "really" makes one better looking [from the movie *Zoolander* if the quote was too subtle]).

4) Some of the original questions are paraphrased or pared down. Those who are interested in fuller treatments can find what they are looking for on FairMormon.org.

Chapter 2

Book of Mormon Concerns

1) The 1769 King James Version [KJV] edition of the Bible contains some errors of translation that were not included in later editions of the KJV. Joseph owned a copy of the 1769 edition and we find some of the 1769 errors in the Book of Mormon. Why?

Answer: I'm glad that this question comes up first in the CES Letter because it draws our attention to a very important point on how God communicates with His children. In D&C 1:24 Heavenly Father says: "Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding."

What this means is that God communicates to *all* people (and that includes prophets) through *their* own language—and *language* is not only the words we speak or write, but the context (including cultural context) in which those words are understood (what non-LDS theologians often refer to as *God's accommodation*). Our ability to comprehend God and His directives is limited. God must descend to our level and speak our language in order for us to comprehend. Those of us who are parents do the same thing when we speak to our children. At early ages they are unable to understand all of our words or concepts so we have to speak in words, phrases, and concepts that mean something *to them*.

We have a great example of *accommodation* in the Book of Mormon—utilizing the "language" of the audience to understand a new message. When Ammon, one of the sons of Mosiah, went to teach the Lamanites, he was captured, brought before King Lamoni, and eventually was assigned to guard the king's flocks. Ammon proved to be a kind of Nephite-ninja and after saving the king's flocks from some wannabe-thieves, Ammon was brought again to the king—this time to explain why he was so tough. As Ammon began his explanation he asked King Lamoni, "Believest thou that there is a God?" to which Lamoni answered, "I do not know what that meaneth."

And then Ammon said: Believest thou that there is a Great Spirit?

And he said, Yea.

And Ammon said: This is God (Alma 18:26-28).

Now critics have tried to use this passage to say, "*See, the Book of Mormon teaches that God is a Spirit!*" They completely miss the point of the Ammon/Lamoni exchange, however. Ammon was trying to explain who God was by teaching in concepts which Lamoni understood. Ammon *accommodated* his discourse so that it made sense to Lamoni. According to how Lamoni understood God—which was a great spirit—Ammon's power came from that same being—the Great Spirit, God. The details could be explained later. The initial purpose was for Ammon to explain some basic principles.

As our children mature, the language we choose as parents matures as well—accommodating to their increased level of vocabulary and understanding. We’ve all heard the “milk before meat” and “line upon line” idioms, but for some reason a number of members and critics seem to think that prophets have a USB port in the back of their spiritual heads through which God should be able to download all advanced spiritual knowledge. These robo-prophets should then be able to dispense pure doctrine to their followers in words that make perfect sense to all those who listen to their voice or read their words, regardless of native language, culture, or period in which they live.

Such a belief is not only wrong, it’s not feasible or logical. There’s a reason why, in school, we first learn addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division before moving on to algebra. Suppose Lord Greystoke’s Tarzan was found by a group of *National Geographic* explorers in the jungles of Africa. After bringing him to civilization it’s discovered that he’s very intelligent and a quick learner. He’s taught English as well as modern hygiene and cultural etiquette. His first introduction into math, however, is algebra. His instructor refuses to teach him basic math first, and demands that he learn algebraic equations from the get go. How far do you think this would fly?

The same method works with all of us when we have to teach foreign or advanced concepts. We use the language of the hearer and then build on concepts by adding additional light.

So to engage the first CES Letter issue regarding the KJV Bible and the Book of Mormon we need to initially understand that the scriptural language of Joseph’s day was the King James English (it’s still, in fact, the scriptural language for many Americans and is the reason why other ancient religious texts—including some of what was included in the Dead Sea Scrolls—have been translated into King James English as well).

The main critique in the first accusation, however, is that Joseph borrowed not only the King James language when he dictated the Book of Mormon but he even included KJV errors that were unique to the Bible of Joseph Smith’s environment. This suggests that Joseph simply copied the Bible for those parts that are found in the Book of Mormon.

My response is twofold: First: So what if he did? What would that really mean? It certainly could be interpreted (see my discussion on differing interpretations in #1) that the Book of Mormon is merely a fictional hodgepodge of information that Joseph threw into a wordsmith stew, but that’s far from the only interpretation of this information. Let me try another interpretation—within a framework that accepts both the scriptural authenticity of the Book of Mormon as well as the possibility (unproven) that Joseph copied the KJV for those passages that appear in the Book of Mormon.

Let’s suppose, first of all, that the critics are right—Joseph copied the KJV passages directly from his Bible. How might this have happened? Here’s one scenario: Joseph Smith is translating the Book of Mormon and comes across passages that were also recorded in the Bible. Joseph realizes this either on his own, or through inspiration, or from a voice on high.

Hey, I know this part, Joseph might have said to Oliver. Hand me the Bible. As he looks over the Biblical verses he says to his scribe: Well, we know that the Bible is the Word of God, so let's stick with the way it's expressed in the scriptures to make sure I get this right.

Why in the world would this be problematic? At this point in Joseph Smith's prophetic career he hadn't yet realized that the future would lead him to seek inspiration for correcting some of the Bible passages with the Joseph Smith Translation.

The critics of course would see this as vindication of their theories. *Aha! Gotcha! This means that the Book of Mormon contains mistakes—mistakes known to exist in the Bible!*

As Yogi Berra reportedly said, "I wish I had an answer to that because I'm tired of answering that question." Latter-day Saints *don't believe in inerrant scripture*. We don't believe in the need for perfectly translated or dictated scripture to accept the text as the Word of God (and from a scholarly perspective, we don't believe that there *is such a thing* as a perfectly translated or dictated text). Any errors copied from the KJV into the same passages of the Book of Mormon *have no bearing* on the spiritual importance of the passages. In D&C 128, for example, Joseph Smith quotes Malachi 4:5–6 exactly as it is quoted in the King James Version of the Bible. In verse 7 the prophet Joseph added: "I might have rendered a plainer translation to this, but it is sufficiently plain to suit my purpose as it stands."

So even if, for sake of argument, we agree that Joseph Smith copied the KJV into the Book of Mormon, this information *should have* exactly zip, nada, zero impact on the belief that the Book of Mormon was translated from an authentic ancient document. It might be *interpreted* as evidence against the Book of Mormon, but such an interpretation is not *required* by the data.

Before we are so quick to give in to something that ultimately has little value to a critic, however, it should be noted that there are problems to this theory—the primary one being that those who witnessed the translation process claimed that Joseph expressly *did not* use the Bible when translating.³ Some were even asked point blank if he had used the Bible or other materials and they replied that he had not.

Assuming that the witnesses weren't lying and assuming they remembered correctly what had happened, I can see at least three ways that we can account for the *absence* of a Bible while still acknowledging that KJV passages appear in the Bible. All three theories would accept the position that Joseph Smith *saw* KJV text in the seer stone.

1) Joseph Smith saw the KJV because that's what the "gift and power of God" showed him—God knew that the Bible was both scripture and imperfect but that the Bible and Book of Mormon support one another. Giving Joseph Smith a KJV translated text simply strengthened the bond between the two books.

2) Joseph Smith had an incredible memory and was able to remember precisely what the Bible said at the right places. While that's technically possible, it's extremely doubtful. Not only would Joseph have to memorize long passages of KJV scripture, but he would have to remember

which words were italicized and which were not (because studies show that he specifically interacted with the italicized words in the KJV).

There is some indication that Joseph Smith had a pretty good memory, but the evidence also shows that sometimes his memory was not so good. He forgot at times, for example, where he was at in the Bible when he was doing the Joseph Smith Translation. On at least a few occasions he retranslated the text for results that yielded the same meaning but with slightly different wording—which again supports the claim that there is no “perfect” translation and that the same concept can be explained in different ways

Another argument against this position is the one dubbed the idiot-savant proposition by Dr. William Hamblin. Joseph was smart enough to remember exact lengthy phrases from the Bible but apparently forgot (or didn’t know, as the critics argue) that Jesus was born in Bethlehem not Jerusalem (as is supposedly claimed in the Book of Mormon—another argument for another time—or you could just read about it [here](#)). Overall, the incredible memory theory has too many holes in my opinion, but remains a possibility.

3) Joseph Smith had an incredible memory when the Lord *wanted* him to have an incredible memory. In other words, when Joseph Smith came to text that was already included in the Bible, God gave Joseph Smith the power to recall what he had read in the KJV and was then able to insert those passages into the Book of Mormon text. This is more reasonable, but still has a problem in the fact that, according to Joseph’s mother Lucy, Joseph hadn’t read through the entire Bible by the time he was translating the Book of Mormon. Hard to recall what you haven’t read. But maybe reading the Bible wasn’t as necessary as having viewed the Bible pages.

It’s possible that at some point Joseph had seen those Biblical pages which would later become related to the Book of Mormon passages and God caused Joseph Smith to recall the images of those pages—almost like pulling up a scanned pdf file today. You don’t have to read pages before you scan them. You can read them later when the scan is retrieved. According to witnesses, Joseph seemed to see and read text from his seer stone.

Brant Gardner, in his award-winning book, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon*, suggests the possibility that after Joseph’s mind converted revelatory thoughts into English, a mental image of a page appeared in his sight (which, of course, takes place in the brain rather than the eyes). The text for D&C 7, for instance, was shown to Joseph by way of revelation, but according to David Whitmer, what Joseph saw in the seer stone was “an oblong piece of parchment, on which hieroglyphs would appear and also the translation in the English language, all appearing in luminous letters.”⁴

The data tells us that A) There are undeniable connections between the Book of Mormon and the KJV, and B) The witnesses to the translation process claim that Joseph Smith was not utilizing the KJV during the translation process. Critics will claim that the witnesses were wrong or lying, while believers will claim that the witnesses may have been wrong (although the same claim is repeated by multiple witnesses) or that it’s one way God chose to help Joseph Smith see the KJV translation.

If you don't believe in God or miracles, then this latter explanation carries no weight. For those of us who believe in miracles, however, it doesn't seem less miraculous for Joseph to see KJV text when translating the Nephite record than it does to believe in healings, revelation, or the Resurrection. Ultimately, it comes down to faith and your default position regarding an acceptance or rejection of the existence of the divine as well as the possibility of divine intervention.

So that was a long answer for a brief accusation (which, by the way, demonstrates how much ink is spilled to reply to an accusation in comparison to how much ink is used to make an accusation), but some of the details in this response will be used to support subsequent responses.

2) The KJV italicized English words were added to the Bible to make it more readable. Why does the Book of Mormon include those italicized words?

Answer: The italicized words in the KJV indicate where the translators inserted English words (not literally translated from the original documents) in order to make the KJV read more smoothly in English. Critics complain when the Book of Mormon copies the italicized words and then they complain when Joseph Smith changed those words which were italicized. It's a no-win situation.

Joseph may have known that the italicized words were translator additions to the text and may have felt the need to change them when so moved, or to leave them alone when so moved. Ultimately, his goal was to convey, as accurately as his language would allow, what was recorded on the Book of Mormon plates. Borrowing or modifying words as he went, were merely tools to see this to fruition (see query #1 above).

3) The Book of Mormon includes mistranslated biblical passages that were later changed in the Joseph Smith Translation [JST] of the Bible. These Book of Mormon verses should match the inspired JST version instead of the incorrect KJV version that Joseph later fixed.

Answer: This is already answered in query #1. Now do you see how helpful it was to respond in length to query #1? To add just a bit more: Brigham Young once said:

Should the Lord Almighty send an angel to re-write the Bible, it would in many places be very different from what it now is. And I will even venture to say that if the Book of Mormon were now to be re-written, in many instances it would materially differ from the present translation. According as people are willing to receive the things of God, so the heavens send forth their blessings.⁵

Translation is filtered through a human messenger who writes or dictates according to the knowledge and understanding he has at the time when the words are committed into writing.

4) *DNA analysis has concluded that Native Americans do not originate from the Middle East or from Israelites but rather from Asia.*

Answer: The leading LDS and non-LDS DNA scientists who have studied the issue all agree that if the Lehwites intermingled with larger pre-existing New World populations, it's likely that their DNA markers would have disappeared. The DNA argument may sound like a solid scientific argument against the Book of Mormon, but in reality it has no teeth. The smartest critics are painfully aware of this fact. To add teeth (more like dentures) to their charge, the critics hitch their arguments to statements made by 19th century church leaders who believed that the descendants of Book of Mormon people account for all or most all of the ancient Americans. Unfortunately for the critics, Latter-day Saints don't believe that an LDS prophet suddenly becomes a robot who is unable to have his own thoughts and opinions (even if those opinions are wrong).

Scholarly studies clearly indicate that the Book of Mormon peoples were a small clan who migrated into the larger population of existing ancient American cultures. Under such conditions (and this is even admitted by the critics), their DNA markers would likely disappear.

For some odd reason a number of critics (and the CES Letter tries to include every single point or argument that can make the Church look false) seem to be bothered by the fact that in 2006 the LDS Church changed the introduction to the Book of Mormon from: a record of "the Lamanites... [who] are *the principal* ancestors of the American Indians," to "the Lamanites... [who] are *among the* ancestors of the American Indians."

Does this change have any bearing on whether or not Joseph Smith was a prophet? It doesn't. The "principal ancestors" intro was first included in the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon. It wasn't in the original text translated by Joseph Smith and it wasn't claimed to be part of the revealed text. It was included in the 1981 header because—according to the logical, human-framed thinking of the day—it made sense and was a good way to introduce the Book of Mormon.

Better education overthrows false assumptions (thank goodness) and with a closer reading of the Book of Mormon in light of what we know about the history of the Americas, we can see that the Lamanites could only have been "among" the ancestors of the American Indians. Why do critics get their knickers in a knot whenever the Church tries *to fix* past errors? You'd think that those same critics who claim foul—that the Church has lied to us, deceives us, and isn't transparent—would be *happy* when errors are corrected.

Why aren't they happy? Because they *want there to be problems*. They're not interested in truth, they're interested in destroying Mormonism. They are not interested in the fact that very few things spoken by LDS leaders carry the same weight as what we find in the Standard Works, they are interested in making prophets and Church leaders look bad. And when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

5) *Horses, cattle, oxen, sheep, swine, goats, elephants, wheels, chariots, wheat, silk, steel, and iron did not exist in pre-Columbian America during Book of Mormon times. Why are these things mentioned in the Book of Mormon as being made available in the Americas between 2200 BC - 421 AD?*

Answer: The contents of this one issue could be answered with a book-length response. I (and others) have written on this topic in depth elsewhere (I address this at length in *Shaken Faith Syndrome*) so I'll try to sum up the most important points.

An anachronism is something that doesn't fit the time period in which it supposedly exists. A cell phone in the hands of Abraham Lincoln would be an anachronism. According to critics, the Book of Mormon contains a number of anachronisms—from plants to animals, from technology to weapons. In each case it is claimed (and supposedly supported by scholarship) that those things mentioned in the Book of Mormon did not exist in the ancient Americas.

The Book of Mormon, for example, mentions horses. While ancient miniature horses existed many tens of thousands of years ago in the Americas, by the time the Lehites arrived the horses would have become extinct—at least that's what current science tells us. The Book of Mormon also mentions the use of swords, whereas scientists tell us that ancient Americans (during Book of Mormon times) did not have the technology to make metal swords.

I won't go through the details of every supposed Book of Mormon anachronism, because interested readers can consult the sources I listed earlier. The critics' list includes many more items than horses and swords, but we'll just pick on those two topics in order to keep this part of the booklet to a minimum. In virtually all instances regarding Book of Mormon anachronisms the problem can typically be attributed to 1 of 2 problems.

1) Ancient examples of some of these items haven't yet been discovered but might be discovered some day. While this may sound like a cop-out, it *does* regrettably describe the state of archaeology—especially Mesoamerican archaeology. In the humid jungles of Central America most things tend to rot or become overgrown. Cloth rots, metal rots, and even bones can rot. Lack of funding often delays (by years or decades) the excavation of known or newly discovered sites (which are often looted by the time archaeologists get there).

It's a simple fact that most things disappear or return to the dust. It is an unavoidable fact that we don't know if the anachronistic items mentioned in the Book of Mormon were prevalent in the location and times they were mentioned, or if they were anomalies even back in their day.

Archaeology is a journal of discoveries that have uprooted previous assumptions. The bones of animals once thought not to exist in some locations have been found; cultural characteristics thought to be unknown to some cultures have been discovered. The door is never shut. New findings regularly emerge. It's important to point out, for instance, that in Joseph Smith's day only about 13% of the items mentioned in the Book of Mormon were known to have existed in ancient Mesoamerica. Today about 75% of those things mentioned in the Book of Mormon have some degree of confirmative support from Mesoamerican archaeology during Book of Mormon times.

2) Assumptions often stand as the gatekeepers to Book of Mormon anachronisms. Who says that Nephite swords were all made of metal? (You'll notice the *all* in this query, because it's certainly possible that in addition to Laban's sword—which came from the Old World—there may have been some early Nephite metal swords.) The belief that swords have to be made of metal is an *assumption* and something *we* read into the text—it's an interpretation of the data. The Aztecs, for example, had wooden clubs laced with bone-cutting obsidian. Know what the Spaniards called these weapons? "Swords."

Animal categories in the ancient world were different from animal categories in our modern world. In the Bible, there were often single Hebrew words for a variety of different animals. In the Bible the Hebrew word for "horse" is *sus* and means "leaping," but it can also refer to the rapid flight of swallows and cranes. Typically our English Bibles translate the word "*sus*" as "horse," but twice it is translated as "crane," and twice as "horseback"—referring to a rider.

As noted earlier, our brains like patterns, so we tend to group lots of things into similar patterns. This happens when we first encounter unfamiliar items such as plants and animals. While modern societies may not do this as frequently, past societies did. When the Greeks first encountered a large, unfamiliar animal in the Nile, for example, they named it hippopotamus or "river horse." Likewise, when the conquistadors arrived in the New World both the natives and the Spaniards had problems classifying new animals. When the Spaniards encountered the coatamundi they described the animal as active, as large as a small dog, but with a snout like a pig. One common Spanish name for this animal was *tejon*, but *tejon* is also the Spanish name for the badger as well as the raccoon. The Aztecs called it *pisote*, which means glutton, but the same term is also applied to peccaries or wild pigs.

This could be the solution to the problem with some seemingly anachronistic animals or plants in the Book of Mormon. When the Aztecs first saw the European horses, they called them "deer." Does this mean that the Mayans, the Europeans, or the horse didn't really exist? Three codex-style painted vases from the late-classic period of Mayan culture (pre-Columbian) appear to depict Mayans riding saddled deer.⁶

It's also possible that the Book of Mormon "horse" referred to the Mesoamerican Tapir (of the large variety). They are actually very similar to horses. Guess to which animal(s) the Mayan term *tzimin* referred? "Tapir" or...(here it comes)... "horse."

We are narrow-minded thinkers. And by that I mean you, not me. No, of course, me too. *All* people are narrow-minded thinkers. We can't help it; it's part of being human. It's tough to think outside of the box and to realize that not everyone comprehends, labels, or sees things like we do. The fact is that every supposed Book of Mormon anachronism can be explained by understanding how different labels worked in antiquity as compared to what those same labels refer to in our own day.

The critics, of course, cry foul. As the author of the CES Letter complained:

I was amazed to learn that, according to these unofficial apologists, translate doesn't really mean translate, horses aren't really horses (they're tapirs), chariots aren't

really chariots....

Unfortunately, this is a common complaint made by numerous critics. It shows a vacuous understanding of real world scholarship. The complaint implies that there is a single definition for every word and that this single definition should fit every place and time in which it is expressed. What then, pray tell, does the word “gay” mean—and remember, you can only give a single unambiguous definition that spans all generations. Does it mean “happy,” or does it refer to same-gender attraction?

What about the simple word “fast”? Most people probably think of something moving quickly. But if you “hold fast” to your position, you are not moving at all. How about a keyboard? Is this something on which you type or play Chopsticks? How about a mouse? Do you put your hand on it while you are at your computer, or are you afraid it will bite? Is a soap something with which you wash, or something you watch on TV? The word “chariot” in our King James Version Bibles (which, critics are quick to remind us, is the underlying language used in the Book of Mormon) refers not only to wheeled chariots but also to palanquins (or human-borne sedans).

When apologists argue that Book of Mormon words—such as “horse,” “chariot,” or “swords”—might mean something different than what we 21st century Americans envision, the alternatives are not selected at random; there is no suggestion that “horse” actually means “toenail,” or that “chariot,” means “running shoe.” The possible alternative definitions are selected from real-world examples wherein those words have been used (or could have been used) to refer to something else. *This* is how language works in the real world.

6) Absolutely no archaeological evidence has ever been discovered to directly support the Book of Mormon or the millions of Book of Mormon peoples who lived in the New World.

Answer: Although this relates to concern #5 above, more can be said. The biggest problem is, once again, a matter of assumptions. In the arid deserts of the ancient Near East, papyrus scrolls survived for many centuries, but in Mesoamerica, good luck trying to find much of anything that wasn't already hard as rock and tough as nails when it was first created. Most of the things found by Mesoamerican archaeologists are things that don't normally deteriorate with time and humidity—things like pieces of clay pots, or art on stone (or carved stone).

How do you suppose archaeologists should distinguish between a Nephite potsherd and a Mayan potsherd? Maybe you could tell a Nephite potsherd by recognizing Nephite art? How, pray tell, would someone recognize Nephite art? What would we expect it to look like? Would Nephite art automatically have pictures of the Savior? And how would we know it was pictures of the Savior unless the Nephite artist graduated from a Greco-Roman art school?

Without texts, it's often impossible to distinguish between cultures that live in proximity of one another, or especially between those who live in the same village or city. Not saying it's impossible, but the task becomes extremely difficult. Biblical scholars struggle with the same dilemma when they try to distinguish ancient Israelite structures from those of their neighbors. They typically look the same. Without textual support archaeologists are generally unable to distinguish between the two.

One of the big problems with New World archaeological discoveries is the extremely small sampling of readable texts that have been discovered in lands and times which match with areas and periods where/when the Book of Mormon peoples would have lived. As with the ancient Israelites, it becomes impossible to distinguish—without textual evidence—who were Nephites and who were non-Nephites.

Critics seem to think (and unfortunately some members fall into the same trap) that we should be able to find a mural of Moroni riding a horse, brandishing a metal sword and either wearing a name-badge that says “Captain Moroni” or captioned with text on the mural which says: “Moroni—yes, the Moroni mentioned in the Book of Mormon—rides into battle.”

But is that what we really could expect? How about if we just found an ancient inscription that said, “This clay pot belongs to Gadianton who stole it from Helaman.” But of course this wouldn’t be written in English, it would be written in some ancient American language, or hieroglyphs, or memes. It would have to be *translated* into English.

Do we suppose that Gadianton (with all of our 9 Roman letters) automatically has a one-for-one letter equivalent (both graphically and phonetically) in all other foreign languages? Do all other languages use consonants and vowels in the same manner that they are used in modern English? Hebrew doesn’t. Ancient Hebrew script had no vowels. What kind of vowel/consonant word syntax would we find in ancient Nephite language?

Take the name *Alexander* for example. In Czech the equivalent is Alda, in German Alec, and in Italian it’s Alessandro. Now if the name Alexander were a unique Book of Mormon name and if Alessandro were really an ancient American name discovered on a tomb, critics would think that the Mormons were trying to pull a fast one by claiming that the two names were equivalent—in fact critics have tried very hard to make that very argument when Mormons have shown them that the ancient Arabian location of NHM is a solid match for the Book of Mormon’s Nahom (but that’s another story for another time).

The “no archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon” argument is really nothing more than a flimsy accusation thrown out by typically uninformed critics (and, on a rare occasion by should-know-better critics) who take a naïve and unrealistic approach to what archaeology could possibly say about the Book of Mormon.

7) LDS apologists [defenders of the faith] typically claim that the real Hill Cumorah was somewhere in Mesoamerica. This contradicts the teachings of Joseph Smith and the Church—there’s a Hill Cumorah Pageant in Palmyra every year for crying out loud!

Answer: Joseph wasn’t the first to call the hill which entombed the plates “Cumorah” and even if he was, there is no evidence that a revelation was given designating the hill as Cumorah. Some early Mormon (probably one of the Pratt brothers) seems to have been the first to dub the Palmyra hill “Cumorah” for the likely reason that he thought it made sense. There is no denying that early Latter-day Saints typically understood their local vicinity as having been the home to Book of Mormon events. Heck, there were all kinds of bones scattered in and under the earth—surely this is where the Book of Mormon took place.

Using the best logic, intuition, and evidence of the day, it *did* make sense. This is once again, however, a human approach—a scientific approach, if you will. Scientists and laypersons alike see patterns and formulate hypotheses based on initial indicators and evidence. In rigorous modern academic research, scientists and scholars dig deep to verify or falsify a theory. In math and physics (“hard sciences”) this is typically easier to do than in the humanities (“soft sciences”).

$2+2=6$; it’s easy to check the accuracy of this conclusion. The claim that the first humans arrived in the New World 13,000 years ago is not so easily proven and may be open to debate. The “13,000 years ago” would be the current *earliest* date for which we can provide evidence. If no bones are ever found to dispute this claim, that doesn’t mean that our timeline is settled—bones aren’t always found. What it means is that the latest theory on the first American populations is based on the best evidence currently available.

So, if I haven’t lost you on this one yet—back to Cumorah in New York. Without revelation on the matter, the early brethren—including Joseph Smith—were free to use their own logic, reasoning, and acceptance or rejection of evidence to formulate their own theories and opinions. Based on the best evidence of the day, the bones on the Midwestern plains seemed to match pretty well with stories from the Book of Mormon. They knew that Mormon had buried plates in the hill Cumorah and that Joseph Smith dug the golden plates out of a nearby hill, so it just made sense that this hill was the Hill Cumorah of the Book of Mormon.

Interestingly enough, it should be noted that as new evidence emerged on the early inhabitants of Mesoamerica, Joseph Smith apparently rethought his views about Book of Mormon geography and might have favored the Central American region for Book of Mormon events. Just like those who study science and scholarship, Joseph Smith changed his views based on better evidence (*not revelation, better evidence*).

From the view of current scholarship, a Hill Cumorah in Palmyra New York isn’t feasible. Reading the Book of Mormon with a more discerning eye reveals that Mormon buried all of the plates *except* the golden plates in the Hill Cumorah. So wherever the plates were buried, the one place we know they *weren’t buried* was in the Hill Cumorah. In other words, Moroni might have buried the plates in a hill he called “Harvey’s Hill,” or any other name *save Cumorah* (unless, of course, he decided to dub this new New York hill “Cumorah” in the same way we find the city of “Paris” in Idaho).

8) *The New World Archaeological Foundation (NAAF) was created in the 1950s & 60s by the Church in order to find evidence for the Book of Mormon.*

Answer: Baloney. It was created to study Mesoamerica and was mostly populated (and lead) by top non-LDS Mesoamerican scholars. Thomas Stuart Ferguson, a sharp businessman who helped get the NAAF off the ground, is quoted in the CES Letter as saying that the Book of Mormon doesn’t fit what is found in Mesoamerica. That’s interesting. I also wonder what President David O. McKay’s barber thought about the location of the Book of Mormon.

First, Ferguson was not a professional archaeologist—he was a lawyer who had a passionate interest in archaeology. Lots of Latter-day Saints today on the blogosphere have a passionate interest in Book of Mormon archaeology—should we take their (often conflicting) geographies as authoritative because of their interest? What a mess of a map that would create! Or, instead, should we evaluate their arguments based on the strength of the evidence they present?

Secondly, even if Ferguson were a professional archaeologist, what would that prove other than that an archaeologist in the 1960s didn't think the Book of Mormon fit Mesoamerica? Yikes! That's it; throw in the towel and close up shop. No other LDS scholar should even bother examining the issue; the matter is settled. Based on the logic of the CES Letter we (and critics) should *automatically* accept the view of modern LDS archaeologists, like Mark Wright or John Clark, because—as bona fide Mesoamerican archaeologists—they *do* believe that the geography fits the ancient Mesoamerican landscape. I personally agree with Clark and Wright because they have produced some interesting correlations between the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica. I value their understanding of the data and interpretation of the evidence because of their expertise, but I accept their views because of the strength of their arguments.

9) *The Book of Mormon contains proper nouns (people and place names) that are strikingly similar to city names found in Joseph Smith's environment.*

Answer: “Real tomato ketchup, Eddie?” (Clark Griswold to Cousin Eddie, *Vacation*). This is one of those claims that would be humorously ironic if not for the fact that it has caused some members' testimonies to stumble. Critics who throw up their hands and reject the *much stronger* evidence of Arabia's Nahom (which is in the right place, and the right time, and marks a direction where an ancient trail turns at the right time and leads to a second location that supports another Book of Mormon geographical marker at the right place at the right time with the right resources) jump with excitement at the supposed similarities between some of the names in Joseph Smith's vicinity and proper nouns in the Book of Mormon.

Critics know (or maybe they don't—see the whaler's Camora tale below) that their argument lacks punch unless they can show that the proper nouns were readily accessible to Joseph Smith—thereby giving the illusion that they were names he sponged from his environment.

There are at least four major problems with the critics' theory that Joseph pilfered names from his environment when writing the Book of Mormon: 1) Many of the cities on the list aren't even close to what we find in the Book of Mormon; 2) Some of the cities were not even known by their current names in Joseph Smith's day; 3) The locations of the cities don't match what we should expect for a map of Book of Mormon geography; and 4) If you draw a large enough circle over any group of cities, you'll find a bunch of coincidental similarities.

The size of the circle which critics include for Book of Mormon names is almost 200,000 square miles in area. LDS researchers have shown that the same Gee-this-looks-like-a-Book-of-Mormon-name game can be played by drawing a circle around Virginia or Hawaii—areas smaller than the critics' map—with even greater success. This is known as the “sharp shooter's fallacy.”

Jimbo claims he is an expert marksman. To prove his point he shows you the side of a barn with 10 bullet holes all confined inside of chalk-drawn circle. After Jimbo walks away with a smile, Linda-Kay tells you that Jimbo was shooting at the knot-hole on one of the wood slats on the barn's wall. Not one bullet hit the knot-hole—didn't even come close. But *after* finishing his 10 shots, he drew a circle around the bullet holes making it appear that his aim was the circle instead of the knot-hole.

In the critics' scenario, Joseph is a clever conman who—while dictating text with his eyes obscured from light and sight (more on this later)—could create a long textually cohesive and consistent story involving many characters with progeny, wars, detailed and interlocking geographic details (all without having previous passages read back), while simultaneously fabricating on-the-fly complex chiasmic structures (a form of Hebrew poetry), moving and theologically rich speeches, as well as seemingly unique character names that parallel real old world counter parts. Somehow, however, as his creative juices were pouring out to his scribe, Joseph was unable to think up fake city names so he plagiarized from names in his environment (a 200,000 square mile area of environment).

If we would apply the critics' theory to Joseph Smith's dictation process we might end up with something like this: Nearly every time Joseph needed to plug a city name into the Book of Mormon (the fictional creation of which proved too overwhelming for his meager intellect) he would pull one from his fabulous memory of city names scattered in the northeastern part of the United States and Canada.

Inside the critics' version of Joseph Smith's mind:

Hellam, Mantua, Lehigh, Rama, Oneida, Kishkiminetas—they sound like great names that I can tweak a bit and read off to Oliver Cowdery, passing them off as real Book of Mormon city and people names. I can't use the original untweaked names because then Oliver would know that I'm borrowing the names from our environment. Alma, Boaz, Jordan, Shiloh—I really like these names as well but can't, for the life of me, figure out how to tweak them so Oliver won't recognize that I just cribbed them from cities just a few thousand miles away. Darn! If only I could figure out how to tweak these difficult names, or if I were only smart enough and creative enough to come up with my own city names then I wouldn't have to worry about Oliver spotting my con.

And, of course, according to the critics, the ruse worked. Neither Oliver, nor Sidney Rigdon, nor the brightest believer (nor critic) ever noticed, until 1983, that a big chunk of the names in the Book of Mormon felt perfectly at home in Joseph's own backyard (he had a big backyard which must have been a bummer to mow). How dumb people must have been back then. Here they lived in the midst of these city names, but never noticed the parallels. It wasn't until someone could look at a really big map (a map that could cover around 200,000 miles) before the obvious became apparent—Joseph stole some of these names outright, and others he tweaked to fit his fictional creation.

The one exception to the *local* city-sponged names is the island of Camora near

Madagascar. Since this is a long way from Joseph's backyard, the young lad must have heard it—assure the critics—from the many whalers who traveled through Palmyra and mentioned the city in their whale tales (literally, “whale tales”) as well as from treasure digging stories of Captain Kidd who was rumored to have buried treasure on the island.

First, there is no evidence that stories of “Camora” were being circulated in Joseph's vicinity (or that it was mentioned in any Captain Kidd stories in his day). Second, we have to ask some questions about Joseph's supposed use of Camora as well as all the other cities which he supposedly lifted from his more local environment: Why? What in the world would be Joseph's reason?

Trying to understand this from a critic's point of view—based on the theory above (the one in Joseph Smith's backyard)—it seems that Joseph really liked the name Camora. And what luck; he had found a city name he could sponge from a foreign land because not a single local town's name would work. Why? Why wouldn't a local name work when they supposedly worked for other Book of Mormon cities? The critics don't tell us.

Can't use a local name again, Joseph must have thought, or I'll get busted. Nineteen plagiarized local names is the limit—twenty, too much. This time I'd better choose a name from a faraway land.

But, there was that pesky problem again of it being recognized by more educated citizens than himself. After all *everybody* in town had heard the whaler and treasure digging stories about Camora.

All I have to do is change a couple of letters. I'll change the first “a” to a “u” and stick an “h” on the end and no will notice! Camora/Cumorah! They probably sound the same—but boy they look different. Maybe DC Comic Books stole Joseph Smith's way of fooling people when they created the Clark Kent/Superman characters—just stick on some glasses and voila! They may sound the same (voices) but they look completely different—unrecognizable to even the most brilliant cops and criminals.

Once again, the ruse (according to the critics' theory) obviously worked. No one—not anyone from Joseph's family or town or any of the local whalers, ministers, scholars, treasure diggers, believers, or critics—noticed that Joseph simply cloaked Camora in a fancy new dress.

10) View of the Hebrews (first published in 1823) tells a story remarkably similar to the one told in the Book of Mormon (published in 1830).

Answer: The first European settlers in America wondered about the origin of the Native Americans. Considering the fact that nearly all New Englanders believed in the Flood, the early Americans *had* to have come from the Old World in *some* fashion. The dispersion of the 10 lost tribes offered a convenient explanation—which would mean that the Native Americans might have retained former Hebrew-like characteristics or customs. Ethan Smith (no relation to Joseph Smith) published *View of the Hebrews* to highlight the Hebrew/Native American connection.

Latter-day Saints, of course, don't believe that the Book of Mormon came to the New World as part of the 10 tribe dispersion, and most academic members believe that the Americas were originally populated (at least in large part) by migrations over 10,000 years ago through what is now referred to as the Bering Strait. Any similarities between the Book of Mormon and *View of the Hebrews* are coincidental and superficial (see the “sharp shooter’s fallacy” in #9). There are far more dissimilarities than there are similarities. In fact, many of the things which *View of the Hebrews* presents as strong evidence for the Hebrew origin of the Native Americans are completely missing from the Book of Mormon.

A number of the parallels between the two books are really not parallels at all. Both books mention the destruction of Jerusalem, for example, but *View of the Hebrews* refers to the Roman attack in AD 70 while the Book of Mormon refers to the Babylonian attack in 586 B.C. Both claim that Hebrew speaking people came to the Americas but *View of the Hebrews* claims they came by land—over the Bering Strait—while the Book of Mormon tells us they came by boat. There are a number of other such “unparallels” between the two works.

While some critics today theorize that Joseph Smith stole many of the elements from *View of the Hebrews* to incorporate into the Book of Mormon, this apparently went unnoticed by the critics in Joseph Smith’s own day. Critics claim that since Ethan Smith (the author of *View of the Hebrews*) was Oliver Cowdery’s pastor (in 1823) that Oliver (who later became Joseph’s scribe) was instrumental in getting Joseph Smith to borrow details from *View of the Hebrews*. Interesting how none of Oliver’s other parishioners pointed this out.

Hey, wait a minute. Aren't you the same Oliver Cowdery that once sat next to me at Church taking notes of the all the cool Hebrew-Indian connections that reverend Ethan Smith used to tell us in Church? And now you put some of those same characteristics in the Golden Bible?! Come on, who are trying to fool?

The only early Mormon-related reference to *View of the Hebrews* (of which I’m aware) comes from Joseph Smith himself who, in a *Time and Seasons* article (the LDS newspaper of the day), briefly quotes from *View of the Hebrews* in support of the Book of Mormon. Yeah—a very con-man-like thing to do.

I stole the material from View of the Hebrews and now I'll quote the same book in support for my own creative work.

What makes this all the more interesting is that Joseph Smith actually missed some of the really good stuff contained in *View of the Hebrews*—supposed evidences that really tied the Native Americans to the Hebrews. According to Ethan, the Native Americans had an imitation Ark of the Covenant, practiced circumcision, and observed the Passover—none of which are mentioned in the Book of Mormon. Ethan claimed that the early Native Americans utilized a large number of temple-related symbols and rituals such as robes of the High Priest (including the Ephod), ritual purification, and washings. Never mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

Joseph Smith missed some of the coolest parallels and instead settled for parallels that are tenuous at best. Why even bother borrowing from a book that supplies so little fodder? In 1996 BYU republished *View of the Hebrews* so anyone can make their own comparison and see for

themselves just how dissimilar they are.

11) Critics like to claim that Elder B.H. Roberts (a member of the Quorum of the Seventy in the late 1800s) faltered in his testimony, in part, because of a study he wrote detailing supposed parallels between the Book of Mormon and View of the Hebrews.

Answer: First, it should be understood that even if the critics are right, it would be sad but not in any way detrimental to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Each person lives ultimately by faith and must come to their own conclusion regarding the truthfulness of spiritual things. While it hasn't happened in many years, we know that some past Church leaders of high-standing fell into apostasy. These individual episodes of apostasy speak about *their* beliefs and/or actions; they do not reveal anything about the nature of the truth of the Church.

Second, the actual evidence (and when I say "evidence" I mean the overwhelming majority of all the things we have that were written or said by Roberts) demonstrates that he was a faithful, believing member until his death. So why the preoccupation with *View of the Hebrews*? It's really not so peculiar—Roberts was an intellectual and understood that to really show the strength of a position, you often have to focus on any potential weaknesses. Roberts played devil's advocate. Only by gathering together all the possible arguments that might suggest that the Book of Mormon was a 19th century fictional creation could one really argue that the book was not a product of its time.

12) The Late War Between the United States and Great Britain was an 1819 textbook written in KJV style language for New York state school children including, possibly, Joseph Smith. The book uses similar language to what is found in the Book of Mormon—including phrases like "it came to pass," "rod of iron," "curious workmanship," and a "stripling" soldier.

Answer: The fact that the book was written in KJV English means, of course, that the book sounds not only like the Bible (the KJV Bible) but also the Book of Mormon (which, as noted in #1 was also dictated into KJV English). This, however, is really where the similarities between the two books end. There are going to be a handful of words or phrases that are similar or even identical—you can pull any two modern English books off the shelf and find similar words or phrases as well.

The "stripling" soldier in the *Late War*, for example, is a single soldier. In the Book of Mormon, the word is used to describe an army of 2000 young men. Webster's 1828 dictionary tells us that a stripling was simply a tall slender youth and we find the use of the term "stripling" throughout Joseph Smith's world (part of his "language") and frequently find it used in connection with soldiering.

We have, for example, the 1836 drama, "The Stripling: A Tragedy by Joanne Baillie." Novelist Miss Ellen Pickering refers to striplings (often in combat) in her 1845 novel *The Squire*,⁷ as well as *Prince and the Peddler*,⁸ and again in the *Merchant's Daughter*.⁹ A "stripling soldier" is mentioned in Mary R. T. McAboy's poem, "Comrade, Is My Mother Coming?" published in 1884.¹⁰ An 1840 military guide which detailed the regulations for dealing with new recruits refers

to “stripling soldiers” as young new recruits.¹¹ “The Siege of Rhodes,” a short story by Bertrand De La Croix (published in 1831), mentions a “stripling soldier”¹² as well. The list could go on. Does the fact that these publications were all printed *after* the Book of Mormon mean that they *sponged from* Joseph’s translation?

If, in revelation, Joseph Smith saw that he needed an English expression to designate young adult male warriors—and he necessarily had to draw upon the language of his day—the term “stripling soldiers” would have perfectly met that intent. “Stripling” and “soldier” are not words invented by Joseph Smith. They are words chosen from his language to convey ideas.

The CES Letter claims that the *Late War’s* use of “curious workmanship” in connection to weapons is one of the evidences which tie it to the Book of Mormon. While the Book of Mormon’s Book of Ether uses the phrase in connection with weapons of war, other passages in the Book of Mormon use the phrase to describe the Liahona as well as ship building. Is the phrase unique to the Book of Mormon and the *Late War*? Well, *no*. A little searching demonstrates that an 1834 edition of the *North American Magazine* describes Indian armor “of curious workmanship” in a collection in a London museum.¹³

We can sleep better at night, however, knowing that the magazine’s editor didn’t steal the phrase from Joseph Smith. Apparently this weirdly unique phrase—“curious workmanship”—that somehow ties every usage to the Book of Mormon, was mentioned in an 1820 book entitled *Scraps for the Curious*. In this book a hawk was given to a foreign statesman, and the hawk was wearing a golden collar of “curious workmanship.”¹⁴

You see, like the words “the” and “it,” the phrase “curious workmanship” was part of Joseph’s English language. We find, for example, the 1822 use of the phrase to describe an Egyptian ram’s head in a book of universal geography.¹⁵ Similarly we find that an 1854 book about Ireland describes chessboards, swords and shields of “curious workmanship.”¹⁶

As far as I can tell, the phrase “curious workmanship” was used in Joseph’s day to describe something not only unusual, but often foreign. Two of the three times the phrase is used in the Book of Mormon are in passages that suggest something foreign or unusual. The Liahona appears at Lehi’s tent (1 Nephi 16:10); and the Lehites build a ship in a foreign land with building instructions received by God (1 Nephi 18:1).

In Ether 10:27 the phrase is appended to Moroni’s translation of the various things going on with the Jaredites under the leadership of King Lib. These things included working with ore, cloth, agricultural tools, and weapons. These things may have sounded unusual or foreign to Moroni (who added the phrase which Joseph Smith translated as “curious workmanship”). Five verses prior to the phrase “curious workmanship” we read that the Jaredites “did buy and sell and traffic one with another, that they might get gain” (v.22) which certainly could refer to trading and bartering with *foreigners* in the land and hence the possible use of “curious workmanship” to refer to some of the foreign items of trade.

So when Joseph Smith needed an English phrase to describe something unusual or foreign he chose one from his language which described what he was trying to convey. How utterly

presumptuous of Joseph to use English language idioms to translate a foreign text into... the English language. The nerve!

Lastly (at least on this topic—sorry to get your hopes up that this book was almost done; you were probably wondering what was on the rest of the pages—doodles?) it should be pointed out that stylometric studies (word prints) show that the Book of Mormon and the *Late War* are very far apart in their use of King James writing styles, and therefore it is extremely unlikely that the Book of Mormon copied or borrowed from the *Late War*.

13) The First Book of Napoleon, The Tyrant of the Earth (1809) has similar language to that found in the Book of Mormon.

Answer: The similarities between the Book of Mormon and the *The First Book of Napoleon* don't extend beyond the fact that both use language that is similar to the King James Bible. Stylometric studies show (like they do with the *Late War*) that the Book of Mormon and *The First Book of Napoleon* are very far apart in their use of King James writing styles. It's extremely unlikely that the Book of Mormon copied or borrowed from the *The First Book of Napoleon*.

The CES Letter highlights a number of supposed parallel word usages between the Book of Mormon and *The First Book of Napoleon* that seem to support a borrowing. In one example, the CES Letter pulls selected text from the Book of Mormon and compares it with text taken from *The First Book of Napoleon*. This is how it appears in the CES Letter:

The First Book of Napoleon:

Condemn not the (writing)...an account...the First Book of Napoleon...upon the face of the earth...it came to pass...the land...their inheritances their gold and silver and...the commandments of the Lord...the foolish imaginations of their hearts...small in stature...Jerusalem...because of the perverse wickedness of the people.

Book of Mormon:

Condemn not the (writing)...an account...the First Book of Nephi...upon the face of the earth...it came to pass...the land...his inheritance and his gold and his silver and...the commandments of the Lord...the foolish imaginations of his heart...large in stature...Jerusalem...because of the wickedness of the people.

Looks pretty impressive. This is where it might be handy to recall “Operation Mincemeat” and Major William Martin’s cadaver with the handcuffed attaché case. The “evidences” were real items. Real dead-guy, real briefcase, real photos. The pieces-parts were all real, but the picture they painted was false. So let’s take a closer look at the CES Letter’s Napoleon/Book of Mormon comparison.

While the two comparisons appear to be comparisons between paragraphs from the two books this is not what we find upon a detailed inspection. Instead, we discover that the parallels were constructed by way of the creative use of ellipses. Technically, ellipses indicate missing

words. While they can correctly be used to indicate missing sentences or even pages, the CES Letter gives the impression (intentionally in my opinion) that the material quoted in the text comes from words grouped fairly close together—maybe within a single paragraph or page.

Caveat Lector, or reader beware! Here is the Book of Mormon section with indicators for the original source of each component separated by ellipses:

Condemn not the (writing) [Title Page] ...an account [Title Page] ... the First Book of Nephi...upon the face of the earth [1 Nephi 1:11]... it came to pass [1 Nephi 1:5]... the land [1 Nephi 2:11]... his inheritance and his gold and his silver and [1 Nephi 2:11]... the commandments of the Lord [1 Nephi 2:10]... the foolish imaginations of his heart [1 Nephi 2:11]... large in stature [1 Nephi 2:16]... Jerusalem [1 Nephi 2:13]... because of the wickedness of the people [1 Nephi 3:17].

You'll notice that the Book of Mormon material was collected from pages spanning the Book of Mormon Title page and *three chapters!* But wait, there's more (as the TV pitchman would say). The *Napoleon* "parallel" material was taken from a span of 25 pages. This looks like a game that's fun for the whole family. Can I play?

"And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?" (John 11:26).

"...and... who... lives and ...believes in [me] ...shall never... die.... Believe... you... this?" (Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*).

"Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12).

"then... spoke... [God]... to them... saying... I am the... light of... the world[:]... he... that... follows... me... will not... walk... in... the dark... but will... have the... light of... life" (Richard Dawkins, again *The Selfish Gene*).

Who knew that Richard Dawkins was a closet Christian?

While my "parallels" from Dawkins' book spanned many pages, I must admit to being a bit lazy in choosing my un-ellipsed verses (if "un-ellipsed" can be considered a word) from individual verses taken from the New Testament book of John. The author(s) of the CES Letter were much more industrious. Their Book of Mormon parallel was culled from a span of 7 pages—providing them, just as with the "sharp shooter's fallacy," a larger area from which to select a bullseye.

LDS scholar Jeff Lindsay¹⁷ has shown that there are a number of striking parallels between the Book of Mormon and Walt Whitman's *The Leaves of Grass*. Why doesn't the CES Letter include *The Leaves of Grass* in addition to the *Late War* and *The First Book of Napoleon* in its list of books from which Joseph plagiarized? Because *The Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855—25 years *after* the Book of Mormon.

14) *The Book of Mormon teaches a Trinitarian God (3 in 1 God) instead of a God as three separate personages as taught by the LDS Church today.*

Answer: First, so what if it did? Assuming that the official 1838 First Vision account is truthful and accurate (which I do), why would Joseph Smith hold a Trinitarian view of the Godhead if he personally saw God the Father and Jesus Christ as separate and embodied beings a few years earlier in the Sacred Grove? Just because he saw them as separate beings doesn't mean he immediately understood the significance and implications regarding a new view of the Godhead. In the book of Acts 7:55 Stephen saw Jesus sitting on the right hand of God, yet a large number of Christians (who all accept the Bible as "true") believe that this vision still fits in line with their belief in a Godhead that consists in three manifestations of a single divine being.

Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that we agreed with the claim that the Book of Mormon taught a Trinitarian Godhead. Would that make the Nephite record less true? Would it negate the claim that Christ's Church was restored in modern times? Why would we expect that the Nephites understood the Godhead to the fuller extent that we understand it today? I'm pretty sure we're going to learn a lot more about the Godhead in the hereafter, does this mean that we don't know anything about the Godhead today?

For some reason at least a few critics (and, unfortunately, a number of members) seem to think that Alma's church was just like a modern LDS sacrament meeting—minus the organ and cheerios. Alma's home teachers probably approached Alma on the last Sunday of the month hoping to pop by after Church; the 12 year-old Nephite boys probably passed the sacrament in hand-woven baskets after the teachers had torn the brown edges off of the ancient Mesoamerican tortillas; and the bishop's second counselor was trying to keep his eyes open in the heat while fanning off the flies.

As noted in #1 God doesn't download the entire theo-cosmological textbook to every prophet. He speaks to us—all of us—in our language.

Having said this, however, I *don't agree* that the Book of Mormon does teach a Trinitarian Godhead. First, as LDS scholars have pointed out, the Book of Mormon's view of the Godhead is actually very much in line with early Israelite views—which were *not* found in the Trinitarian views of Joseph Smith's day.¹⁸

Second, a thorough reading of the Book of Mormon shows that while some verses are ambiguous and might be interpreted to support a Trinitarian God, a large portion of the verses are less ambiguous and denote that Jesus and the Father are two separate beings. After the initial printing of the Book of Mormon Joseph went through the book and changed the more ambiguous verses to clarify the differences between the Father and the Son.¹⁹

The critics' argument is, once again, based on a superficial reading of the text with the end goal of mining the book to find the parallels they want to see rather than the more complex parallels that really exist with real old world beliefs.

Chapter 3

Book of Mormon Translation Concerns

15) *Joseph Smith used a rock in a hat to translate the Book of Mormon.*

Answer: The Lord speaks in the “language” and “understanding” of His children. To Joseph Smith, the Nephite Interpreters (see Ether 4:5) were like his seer stone (Joseph and other early members referred to the Interpreters as the “Urim and Thummim,” but this association is not made in the Book of Mormon—you can read more about it [here](#)). One (the Nephite Interpreters) is a rock *out of a hat*, the other (the seer stone) is a rock *in a hat*.

The Lord used the tools available to Joseph Smith to reveal the text of the Book of Mormon. Joseph, and some other religious people in his vicinity and time, believed that the ability to “see” in a seer stone was a gift from God. God used Joseph’s “language” as a tool whereby Joseph Smith could translate the ancient text. Is a translation from a rock in a hat any less miraculous than a translation from a rock outside of a hat? Does putting the rock in the hat automatically void revelation from God?

While it may seem strange to us in the 21st century that someone could look into a rock and see the translation of a text, it really only matters if Joseph Smith believed it—which he did. Technically there is nothing special about the seer stone—it’s a rock. Technically, there is nothing special about the water in a baptismal font—it’s still H₂O. There is nothing scientifically different about the water that can wash away the sin of the one being baptized.

Unlike Roman Catholics, Latter-day Saints do not believe that the bread and water of the sacrament undergoes a chemical change when it is blessed. It’s still bread and water. Scientifically, the emblems of the sacrament are no different than the left over bread in the plastic wrapper or the water droplets in the sink that remain after filling the sacrament cups.

When Richard Dawkins said that one of his prized possessions is a first edition of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, we can rest assured that chemically there is nothing different with this particular copy than a newer edition or facsimile copy of the first edition. What makes a house more special because Elvis once slept there? What makes a piece of gold, flattened and formed into a circle, more valuable to the owner if it happens to be a wedding ring? Why is the wedding veil worn by your grandmother more valuable to you than to someone else if it ended up at a Good Will store?

When the sun rises on any Sunday morning, do gravity and light magically change as soon as the day transitions from Saturday to Sunday? Nope, it’s often the same as the day before or the day after. It becomes a special day for Christians because of what the day symbolizes, not what it has become in any physical sense. What makes August 12 more important than August 11, or August 13? It’s my birthday (and don’t forget to send a Face Book birthday wish!). The day may not be important to you, but it’s important to me. The seer stone, the baptismal water, and the bridal veil don’t change on their own, they change according to their *owner*.

Joseph Smith believed in what today's "enlightened crowd" might call "magic" (and, as noted above, even the staunchest of today's atheists still, even if unconsciously, believe in some version of "magic" as well). In Joseph Smith's day/circle a seer stone was viewed as a manifestation of God's power (it still is in some circles). God knew what Joseph Smith believed and what would work for him, because God knew Joseph's "language." The seer stone was just the right tool—similar enough to the Nephite Interpreters—to provide the crutch needed for Joseph to receive revelation.

Remember the movie *Dumbo*? Remember the feather? Timothy the mouse convinced Dumbo that the magic feather gave Dumbo the power to fly. By the end of the movie, Dumbo realized that he could fly without the feather. For those of you in the younger generation who haven't seen the movie—shame on you. Go rent it (and you can see a clip about the feather [here](#)). Near the end of Joseph Smith's life, Joseph gave up the seer stone and told Orson Pratt that he didn't need it anymore—he could receive revelation without it.

I recognize that comparing Joseph's use of a seer stone to Dumbo's feather may sound sacrilegious. Critics will chuckle, and believers might feel a bit offended, but the truth is that Walt Disney didn't make up the concept of empowerment. It's a natural and unavoidable part of human (and apparently cartoon elephant) psychology. An inanimate object can act as a symbol of power and help a person achieve their goals. Psychologists often utilize this principle in behavioral therapy. While the Dumbo feather analogy may sound foolish, childish, naïve, magical, or even blasphemous, it shows, once again, how God works through humans by accommodating His directives to *our* language. He knows how humans think and process information, and He uses our deficiencies to bring forth eternal truths.

And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them (Ether 12:27).

Chapter 4

First Vision Concerns

16) *Joseph Smith gave 4 noticeably different accounts of the First Vision.*

Answer: Joseph recorded his vision at different points in his life and emphasized different details depending on his audience and hindsight. The important points are in harmony with each other. Astute readers may have noticed that I included “hindsight” in the first sentence. The truth is that *all* people have fallible memories. Just because Joseph received a vision—a visitation with God the Father and the Son—doesn’t mean that he automatically recalled every detail of the vision with precise accuracy. Experts know that if you don’t write something down right away, you’ll forget (or perhaps even conflate) some of the details. Stuff happens to me all the time which, years later, I wish I would have recorded so I could better recollect the details of the event or experience.

There is no indication that Joseph immediately wrote down what happened. How many typical 14 year-old kids would? How many adults would (and we’re talking about in an age *prior* to having the advantage of quickly posting your story on Facebook)?

Eight months after he married Emma, 21 year-old Joseph acquired the plates. Shortly thereafter he began translating the record with Emma as his scribe. Emma later recalled that her husband “could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictate a book like the Book of Mormon.”

And, though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired, and was present during the translation of the plates, and had cognizance of things as they transpired, it is marvelous to me, “a marvel and a wonder,” as much so as to anyone else.²⁰

If the young adult Joseph couldn’t write a coherent letter in his early twenties, imagine how poor his writing abilities might have been at 14 years old when he experienced his vision. No wonder he didn’t record it immediately.

Joseph always seems to be held to a higher standard because of what he saw, heard, or experienced. None of those things made him less human. When Joseph initially recorded the event, he focused on those things which made the most impact on him at that time. Later, as he retold the event again, he included more details which—in hindsight—made additional sense from the perspective at the time he was writing. Occasionally Joseph left out some of the details from earlier recitals. Did he forget to include the details (not like he had *MS Word* and could go back and reinsert stuff he forgot to include) or was it simply because he didn’t focus on those points for this particular audience or perspective?

When we tell a story we may recall additional details that we forgot to include in the first telling. We make it a point to include those missing details in subsequent recitals. *That’s how we humans do things*. Here’s a scenario that might sound familiar. I call my adult daughter to tell her

about the excitement I witnessed at the local Walmart tonight. My wife is not on the phone but is in the same room and can hear what I say.

Me to my daughter: “It was wild. This guy was running for the exit with a *Play Station* tucked under his arm like a football.”

My wife: “Tell her about the alarm screeching from the electronics department.”

Me: “Yeah... apparently when the guy left the electronics department he triggered some sort of alarm, you could hear the squeal through the store. So anyway... he runs for the exit and actually gets outside....”

My wife: “Well, he knocked over a shopping cart before getting out.”

Me: “He *almost* made it outside before an employee grabbed his jacket, spinning him around and knocking over a shopping cart.....” *Me glaring at my wife....* “...*but* he made it all the way outside of the store before he got tackled by another employee.”

Despite the glare-over-the-tops-of-my-glasses-perched-over-my-nose at my wife, I could have retold the story correctly all by myself. Reluctantly I admit, however, that she did help me fill in some details I was leaving out in my excitement to share the event. That’s how the retelling of memories works with us mortals—and Joseph Smith was as mortal as any of the rest of us.

17) One First Vision account says that Joseph was visited by an angel, rather than by Jesus.

Answer: In Joseph Smith’s day, it wasn’t uncommon to refer to Jesus as “an angel.” In the 1832 recital Joseph claims he saw and heard “the Lord” (which could have meant Jesus or the Father). On 9 November 1835 Joseph recounted the vision to a man who had come to visit. Joseph’s scribe Warren Parrish took notes about the conversation. In this recital Joseph detailed that he had seen “two personages” (and we already know from the 1832 account that at least one of these is Jesus or the Father). Five days later, again in a conversation with a visitor, Joseph explains that he was about 14 years old when he received “the first Visitation of Angels” (which obviously means that he had no problem calling both personages—one of whom he had already designated as “the Lord”) as “Angels.”

Many LDS leaders referred to Jesus as an "angel" who appeared to Joseph Smith even after the official 1838 account of the First Vision had been published. Brigham Young, for example, who had read Joseph’s 1838 account said in 1855 that “an angel” informed Joseph not to join any of the existing sects. John Taylor, who was the editor of the *Times and Seasons* in 1842 when the official 1838 recital was printed, said in 1863 that “an angel” came to Joseph and revealed the true position of the world.

In 1864 George Albert Smith gave a talk wherein he quoted a portion of the 1838 recital and expressly noted that Joseph had seen two personages and that one had introduced the other as His “beloved son.” *Five years later* George said that Joseph “was enlightened by the vision of a holy angel” when Joseph had asked which church was right. Modern critics are the ones who have a problem with the term angel being used to describe the Lord. The early Mormons had no problem interchanging the terms.

18) *The earliest version gives Joseph's age as 15 when he experienced the First Vision. Subsequent recitals claim that he was 14.*

Answer: As noted above, Joseph didn't write down the details of the event until several years later. How weird that someone would forget what year an important event happened. Tell that to all the husbands (and sometimes wives) who can't remember their anniversary date let alone how many years they've been married. If we don't write things down, we tend to forget when things happen.

“I just bought this vacuum last Christmas and it's already stopped working,” says the customer to the clerk.

“You bought this vacuum two Christmases ago,” replies the clerk after looking up the sale on his computer.

When Joseph first wrote about his brother Alvin's death, he got the year wrong as well. This is what happens when you are human. The 1832 First Vision account was written by Joseph Smith himself. It was a rough draft and was not meant for publication. After Joseph had written the text, his scribe, Frederick G. Williams, inserted “in the 16th year of my age” into the document (which would have made Joseph 15 at the time of the vision). This is a bit like my fictional phone conversation with my daughter (see #16 above). Williams, probably in discussion with Joseph, was trying to add details to clarify the document. This detail was likely in error and was corrected in later versions.

19) *No one in Joseph Smith's day (including his family) seems to have heard about his First Vision until at least a dozen years later. There is absolutely no record of a First Vision prior to 1832.*

Answer: President Thomas J. Whitmore (in the movie *Independence Day*): “Take my word for it, there's no Area 51, there's no recovered spaceship.” Secretary of Defense Albert Nimzicki: “Ah, excuse me, Mr. President, that's not entirely accurate.”

The First Vision took place in 1820. So according to the CES Letter the first record of the First Vision would have appeared in 1832. First, it should be noted that there are a few early sources which imply—with some ambiguity—that the First Vision was being discussed as early as 1827. In my opinion, however, the interpretation of the data from these early sources leaves too much room for misinterpretation—so I'll skip to the next known source.

In 1831 a local paper was reporting that, according to LDS missionaries, Joseph had seen God frequently and personally and had received authority to teach about Christ's true church. The 1831 source is, in my opinion, *solid* evidence for early LDS discussions about the First Vision. The CES Letter says that there is no record of the First Vision until 1832; the 1831 newspaper story contradicts that argument. The claim that all swans are white is falsified by a single black swan. Eleven years instead of twelve years, however, is mere quibbling. The truth is that we do not currently have any documents that mention or imply a knowledge of the First Vision until nearly a dozen years after it took place.

Just because we don't know of any solid pre-1831 documents mentioning the vision, however, doesn't mean that everyone was silent on the matter, or that no one besides Joseph knew of his experience. The single black swan is instructive. Did all the people in Joseph Smith's vicinity write down everything of interest that happened in their neighborhood (and, it should be noted, Joseph wasn't the only one claiming to have had a vision of Christ, so maybe his claim was a big "yawn" to some of his neighbors)? And if they did write everything down, did all of those journals, notes, dictations, survive? And if they did survive, do we have them all for study? We can never positively say that there are no earlier records of Joseph Smith's First Vision; the best we can say is that the earliest records of which we currently know date to more than a decade after Joseph Smith claimed to have experienced the vision. So what?

For the sake of argument, we might agree that Joseph Smith didn't retell the event until many years later. We must then ask, why?

The details Joseph included in his 1832 recital suggest that he initially understood his vision as a very personal experience. He may have felt a need to keep the sacred event private. After having experienced the vision, Joseph returned home and leaned contemplatively against the wall by the fire place. Sensing that something was amiss his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, asked Joseph if everything was ok. Did he tell her what he had just experienced? Nope. His response: "I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true." He could have told her about the vision, but for reasons of his own (and those who have had very spiritual experiences may understand this better than those who have not had spiritual experiences) decided to keep the information to himself.

Three years later, on September 21st 1823, Moroni visited Joseph three times, during which time Joseph was told about the golden plates. By the next day, however, Joseph had not shared the experience with a single soul. It wasn't until Moroni came and visited him again that Joseph was "commanded" to tell his father what he had seen.

Shortly after the First Vision Joseph apparently confided in a local minister. He probably needed to talk to someone—anyone of trust with whom he could share his story. My guess is he hoped that a minister would be sympathetic and would maybe even give him advice or direction. Instead, however, the minister not only downplayed his experience but claimed that such things were of the devil. Nice thing for a 14 year-old kid to hear—a kid who had just experienced something miraculous, sacred, and perhaps more than a bit scary. Like any normal kid who might have received such a response from a religious leader in the community, Joseph was probably hesitant to tell anyone else about the story for fear that they would think he was crazy, a liar, or consorting with the devil.

It's also significant to point out that we, in the modern Church, make more of Joseph Smith's First Vision than did Joseph or the early Church. Today, thanks to hindsight, we call this event the First Vision (with capital letters) not only because it was the first of many visions Joseph would experience, but also because we now know that this began a course that would eventually lead to the Restoration. This is not something that Joseph would have understood, however, until many years later. In Joseph's day the First Vision was a personal experience for Joseph, whereas the Restoration really began with the golden plates.

More often than not, those things throughout our past—things which shape the direction of our lives—are not really appreciated or understood until many years later when we can reflect on them and how they brought us to our present state. In hindsight, Joseph—and the general membership of the Church—were able to look at the past events of Joseph’s life and see how important they were in the evolving role of the young prophet.

While the author of the CES Letter claims that he had never heard of the various accounts of the First Vision, a discussion of some of these accounts was published in the official Church magazine, the *Improvement Era*, in 1970, and again in the newer official Church magazine, the *Ensign*, in 1996. The Church wasn’t trying to hide the fact that there are different versions, but doesn’t focus on the various versions because the 1838 version is the most complete one available.

20) *History demonstrates that there was no 1820 religious revival as Joseph claimed.*

Answer: Baloney. Joseph said religious “excitement” (not necessarily the more specific “revival”) and the fact is that there was indeed religious excitement—and this is proven by the newspaper articles of the day which talk about the religious excitement in Joseph’s neighborhood. Joseph said the excitement began with the Methodists and we do, indeed, read of a Methodist “camp meeting” in Palmyra in 1820.

While we also find talk of the religious excitement in the personal writings of some who lived in Joseph’s vicinity, the religious commotion might have been *too common* to be considered constantly newsworthy for the local papers. In 1820 the *Palmyra Register*, for instance, ran a notice about a man who died from alcohol poisoning. He apparently became drunk at the previous evening’s Methodist camp meeting and died the next day. The notice *wasn’t about* the camp meeting, it was about the alcohol-poisoning death. The alcoholic consumption just happened to happen at a camp meeting.

This is a great example of the accuracy of the expression, “the absence of evidence is not evidence for absence.” If the newspaper would not have reported the man’s death, there might not have been a record of this specific Methodist camp meeting—which, of course, would have meant to the critics that it never happened. This is an important point that should be repeated every time a critic says something like, “*Nobody heard of Joseph’s First Vision for more than a decade after it happened*” (see #19 above). We just don’t know what kind of jelly was in the donut when all that’s left is the donut box.

Chapter 5

Book of Abraham Concerns

21) *When Joseph Smith first published the Book of Abraham in the Times and Seasons he said that the ensuing text was a “translation of some ancient records... purporting to be the writings of Abraham... written by his own hand, upon papyrus.” Having examined the papyri, however, scholars claim that it was written in 1st century BC, nearly 2,000 years after Abraham could have written it.*

Answer: There is a difference between the date when a text is written and the date when a manuscript is published or produced. Every copy we have of any book in the Bible was actually originally written well before the date of the manuscript on which they were copied. If you buy the book *A Christmas Carol* you should be pretty confident that the book was written by Charles Dickens. Now was the book in your possession actually written by Charles Dickens, or was the original story written by Charles Dickens? Obviously, some modern editor put Dickens’ story into a modern format to be published in a book you just purchased at your local bookstore, but the story was still written by Charles Dickens—even by “his own hand.”

22) *Egyptologists say that the surviving Book of Abraham Papyri have nothing to do with Abraham and are instead, common Egyptian funeral texts.*

Answer: This issue is one of the enormously complex topics that can’t be answered in a brief response—or even in a multitude of books. Some background info is necessary to make sense of what’s going on and why someone would claim it proves that Joseph Smith was a fraud.

Joseph Smith acquired several ancient Egyptian scrolls. As Joseph translated the papyri he claimed that they contained (at least in part) teachings of the Old Testament patriarch Abraham. In all likelihood (and there is some testimony witness to support this) Joseph Smith used the seer stone to “translate” the Book of Abraham. You’ll notice that I put translate in quotation marks—Joseph Smith couldn’t read Egyptian any more than he could read reformed Egyptian.

When we say translate today, we refer to the process of reworking the writings of one language into another language by someone who intimately knows both languages. That’s not how Joseph Smith did *any* of his translating. His conversion from an ancient language into English was accomplished by means of receiving revelatory thoughts in his own version of English (his “language”—see D&C 1:24) and dictating those to a scribe. He probably had to choose words that closely approximated what ideas he was receiving by revelation.

Some of his English translations of the papyri were eventually compiled into scripture as the Book of Abraham (we don’t know what happened to everything he translated from the papyri—but a good portion of it has disappeared).

Many years after Joseph Smith’s death the scrolls went different directions and a huge

percentage of the total number of papyri were burned in the Chicago fire of 1871. Among the few surviving scrolls was one known as a Book of Breathings (or Breathing Permit) written for a deceased man by the name of Hor (or Horus). The Breathing Permit was a funerary text, pretty much like other Breathing Permits that were frequently included with the mummies at burial. This particular scroll contains a graphic that became Facsimile 1 in our Book of Abraham.

Here's where the problems start. A) According to Abraham 1:12, Abraham refers the reader to the graphic (Facsimile 1) at the commencement of "this record"—suggesting that the graphic should be on the same papyri as the text for the Book of Abraham. Trouble is, as the critics note, the surviving parts of the scroll (which includes most of the graphic for Facsimile 1) have nothing to do with Abraham.

B) There's a collection of early nineteenth century LDS documents known as the Kirtland Egyptian Papers (KEP). The papers were produced by Joseph Smith and his scribes. We don't fully know what they were all about but they have some obvious connection with the Book of Abraham and the translation of the papyri. The papers are primarily in the handwriting of a few of Joseph Smith's scribes and there is debate on how they were produced. Did Joseph Smith read (by revelation) the papyri while dictating to the scribes, or are they worksheets wherein Joseph and his scribes tried to figure out an Egyptian alphabet? This they might have done based on an examination of the Egyptian characters and an original (now lost) copy of the Book of Abraham that was dictated previously by revelation.

The problem with the KEP is that they contain the exact same Egyptian characters that we find on the Horus papyrus adjacent to the Facsimile 1. Next to the copies of the Egyptian characters are English "translations" which seem to be an attempt to translate the Egyptian characters. These English "translations," however, have absolutely nothing to do with the characters from which they seem to have been translated.

So what's going on? The critics, of course, claim that it's a slam dunk against Joseph Smith. He tried to translate Egyptian characters and failed miserably—creating, instead, the fictional Book of Abraham. That's an easy scenario, but there are other options. I'll give you one big-picture option with some variations.

Quite often Egyptian scrolls contained appendages to the original material. The Horus scroll might have been much longer (and the debate is still out on measurements which might settle the issue). It's possible that the Horus scroll with the graphic for Facsimile 1 *was* at the beginning of an overall record but the part containing the Book of Abraham has disappeared. Not only might the scroll have been longer than what we now have, but sometimes the Egyptians wrote on both sides of scrolls.

Perhaps the textual part for the Book of Abraham was on the back side of the missing part of the scroll. If you've ever lost pieces to a puzzle you know that you can assemble the puzzle and guess what should have been in the lacuna (the missing area). If the puzzle depicts a familiar scene or picture it's easier to guess what's missing than if it depicts an unfamiliar scene or picture. With the latter, it's difficult to know what is missing with any certainty.

The Egyptians frequently put associated graphics and texts on different and separate scrolls. The graphics were, therefore, put on scrolls with texts that had nothing to do with the graphics. In other words, the original Book of Abraham *text* scroll could have disappeared but the graphic survived on the scroll of Horus.

As noted above, Joseph Smith couldn't translate in the normal sense of the word. When he translated the Book of Mormon plates he wasn't even looking at the plates. He would have no idea what part of a scroll—or even which scroll—might have contained the Book of Abraham text. The comment attributed to Abraham: “I refer you to the graphic at the commencement of this record” could have been Joseph Smith's editorial comment. The graphic for Facsimile 1 was easily identifiable and it would have made perfect sense that the text next to the graphic belonged to the graphic.

These explanations help us to understand some possibilities with the KEP. If you had pointed to a reformed Egyptian character on the Book of Mormon plates, Joseph Smith would probably have had no idea what the character represented. He might have thought he could read the text, and could, theoretically, receive an English Book of Mormon paragraph while putting his finger on a line of Reformed Egyptian characters—characters that were perhaps unrelated to the English translation in his seer stone.

It's possible that he tried to include some “study it out with your mind” during the Book of Abraham translation. With the Book of Mormon plates he was forbidden from showing them to others. With the papyri, he had not such restriction. By now Joseph Smith and other LDS leaders had taken some courses on Hebrew and correctly assumed that Egyptians also read from right to left instead of left to right as we find in English. Assuming that the Book of Abraham text was adjacent to the facsimile, Joseph Smith and his scribes might have made the translation process a group project.

Perhaps they noted and recorded an Egyptian character (or tried to break it down into something that represented many characters) then waited for Joseph Smith to read off the “translation” he saw in the seer stone. God was revealing the Book of Abraham all right, but God wasn't responsible for what these men thought was the character source for each English translation that Joseph Smith dictated. God wanted Joseph Smith and the world to have the scriptural text; He wasn't trying to help Joseph Smith set up a scholarly Egyptian Alphabet—that was their own doing.

While it may seem strange to think that Joseph Smith could receive a revealed translation of an ancient text that might not have been in his hands during the translation process, we could point to other instances where this exact thing happened. When Joseph “translated” the Bible for the JST, for example, he didn't have any original Bible manuscripts in his hands. Likewise, when he dictated the Book of Moses, the text was revealed without so much as a hint of Joseph having access to an ancient document. Section 7 of the Doctrine and Covenants was translated from an ancient parchment written by the Apostle John. Did Joseph have the parchment in his hand? Nope, he saw it in revelation.

This realization opens the door for one or more options in understanding the Book of

Abraham. The Book of Abraham text document may have been in Joseph's possession, but it need not have been so. Maybe there was no Book of Abraham text on the scrolls at all. Joseph Smith wouldn't know. God could have used the papyri and Joseph Smith's "language" as catalysts to open Joseph Smith's mind to receiving revelation of what was once on a preexisting Book of Abraham text. Or maybe the Book of Abraham text was on some other scroll, part of which might have been in Joseph's possession, or part of which might not have made it to Joseph's hands.

The interesting thing about the English scripture known as the Book of Abraham is that it *really does* have some very compelling ties to authentic ancient Old World traditions about Abraham—traditions that were unknown (or virtually unknown) in Joseph Smith's day. In other words, the translation appears to be based on a real ancient Abrahamic text, even if we don't know the particulars as to how those traditions were revealed to Joseph Smith or what relationship they have to the Joseph Smith Papyri.

While the critics claim that the interpretations of the graphics in the different facsimiles don't match what Egyptologists claim they represent, the fact is that A) Joseph Smith is surprisingly accurate on at least a few of the interpretations, and B) some of those graphics might have been repurposed by 2nd century Jews to mean something else. The Egyptian God Isis, for example, was represented as Abraham in early Jewish literature. So while critics claim that Joseph was wrong in referring to figures in the Egyptian facsimile as "Abraham" Joseph would have been spot on in his claim if he was a Jew in the period when the papyri were created.

Symbols, graphics, and figures don't mean anything by themselves. They only mean something in the context of a cultural understanding. The hook cross symbol, commonly called the swastika, has been utilized by various cultures since Neolithic times. The symbol has been used in Indian religions for centuries and is still considered to be a sacred symbol. In the early 20th century the symbol was repurposed by the Nazi's.

The meaning and interpretation of graphical symbols have changed through the years depending on the culture who adapted the graphic. The same thing could have happened with the Book of Abraham facsimiles. This claim isn't as far-fetched as critics would like you to think. There is evidence that interpretations based on a 2nd century Jewish repurposing of the Book of Abraham facsimiles would have produced some striking similarities to what we find in the descriptions given in Joseph's translation of the Book of Abraham.

23) The Book of Abraham teaches a Newtonian view of the universe (which is what was believed—incorrectly—in Joseph Smith's day).

Answer: Actually, the Book of Abraham teaches a geocentric view of the universe (a universe with the earth at the center). This is what *ancient* people would have believed and it is not what was believed in Joseph Smith's day. The fact that the Book of Abraham does *not* teach a Newtonian view of the universe—which is what was believed in Joseph Smith's day—is evidence in favor of the proposition that the book was translated from an ancient text.

24) *The overwhelming majority of the Book of Abraham text simply repeats (quotes, or paraphrases) what's already in the Old Testament—and uses King James wording.*

Answer: So? (See #1 above for KJV English.) The Book of Abraham tells a story about a character already known to us in the Bible—Abraham. All ancient religious stories about Abraham will tell a lot of the same stuff—they are often copies of copies, or copies of older legends or oral traditions. We would be surprised if the story was materially different—that would suggest that Joseph made it up. Instead, it contains much of what we find in the Bible but with additions *not* found in the Bible—additions, I might add, that are attested in other ancient documents about Abraham.

25) *Anachronisms: The facsimiles would not have existed in Abraham's day.*

Answer: Wonder Bread didn't exist in Jesus' day either but that doesn't mean that eating it during the sacrament means that Jesus didn't exist. All people adapt teachings and ideas to “their language”—to symbols that are relevant for their time and location. Most American artworks depicting Jesus illustrate a man of European descent who often lives in a very European-looking world. Do such art depictions mean that Jesus didn't exist? It's possible (as discussed in #22) that the Egyptian facsimiles were repurposed by 2nd century Jews to express ideas about Abraham. There is historical precedent for Jews adapting Egyptian symbols to teach Jewish traditions.

26) *Contrary to what we know from science, the Book of Abraham claims that the Sun gets its light from Kolob.*

Answer: This is answered in query #1. God taught Abraham in the “language” of his day—from within a framework of his cultural perceptions and worldview. He did the same thing to those who recorded Genesis—God didn't give them advanced scientific ideas, but rather shared information about who they are in relationship to each other, the world, and most importantly to God. This information was shared in a vessel of a worldview and cosmology that they already understood (even though it doesn't square with modern science and 21st century cosmology).

27) *The Philosophy of the Future State (printed in 1829 and owned by Joseph Smith) makes claims that are likewise made in the Book of Abraham.*

Answer: First, we don't know when Joseph acquired the book. We know that in 1844 he donated his copy to the Nauvoo Library. Owning it in 1844 doesn't mean he read it in 1830—that's an *assumption*. Even if he had read it, however, many of the topics in the book were already being promoted as common Protestant ideas, and a number of the things in the book directly contradict some of the teachings in the Book of Abraham.

28) *The Church doesn't know how to respond to the Book of Abraham problems and now concedes that the Book of Abraham text doesn't match Egyptian translations.*

Answer: The Lord doesn't typically tell us how miracles are performed. Do we know how the Red Sea was parted, how water was turned to wine, how God revealed the 10 commandments, or how Jesus rose from the dead?

We know we have revelation given to Joseph regarding the Abraham of the Bible. Somehow the papyri played a role in this revelation. Was the Book of Abraham text on the missing pieces of papyri? Did the drawings on the Papyri open Joseph's mind to receive a revelation about a lost document about Abraham (ala the Book of Moses), or was something else happening? We don't know. The Lord hasn't revealed it. The Lord doesn't care about the papyri; He cares about the story of Abraham and the teachings which the story restored, and He somehow managed to open Joseph's mind so he could receive this information.

Chapter 6 Polygamy/Polyandry Concerns

29) *Joseph Smith was married to at least 34 women.*

Answer: Two or thirty-four, the number is irrelevant if the practice was commanded by God. Either it was or it wasn't. If it was, then Joseph cannot be faulted for living the commandment; if it wasn't, then it doesn't matter how many extra wives he married, it would have to be a sin. The way to know if he was commanded by God to practice plural marriage is answered by knowing if he was God's prophet, not by deciding we don't like that he married other women.

This is such an emotionally-charged and complex issue that—like many of the topics in the critics' list of “concerns”—it should really be answered by a lot more material than I can provide in this booklet. For those who have heartburn over the plural marriage issues I would suggest listening to this free [FairMormon podcast](#), or if you *really* want to get into the details, I suggest you read the book, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding* by Brian C. Hales and Laura H. Hales.

30) *11 of those women were married (simultaneously) to other men.*

Answer: The answer to #29 should suffice for this concern as well, but I will add that Joseph apparently also included dynastic sealing under the umbrella of marriage. A dynastic sealing is where someone is sealed (bound by God for time and eternity) into part of a dynasty or family unit. Dynastic sealings don't (and perhaps didn't) necessarily involve intimacy. There is no evidence, so far, that these sealings were anything more than platonic bindings of family units. Joseph apparently wanted to be sealed to his followers, his followers to their families, and ultimately all of us sealed to the Heavenly family.

31) *7 of those women were teenagers as young as 14.*

Answer: See answers #29 and #30 above. There is no evidence that these young marriages involved intimacy.

32) *Joseph Smith promised some of these women (and their families) eternal life; some he threatened with loss of salvation. He also claimed that he would be slain by an angel with a sword if he didn't marry those girls.*

Answer: Joseph consistently asked potential plural wives to seek the Lord's position on the matter for themselves before agreeing to plural marriage. He emphasized that they needed to gain their own spiritual witness of the principle. Their journals often record how they didn't accept the practice—and often vehemently opposed the practice—until they discovered, on bended knee, that

the doctrine was of God.

33) President Hinckley said polygamy is not doctrinal.

Answer: The practice of plural marriage is not in effect for modern Latter-day Saints but was in effect for nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints. President Hinckley was not denying that the practice was doctrinal for the early Restored Church, but simply pointing out that it is contrary to the doctrinal practice for the people of today's Church.

34) Joseph Smith was not honest. He secretly married and publically denied that he was practicing plural marriage.

Answer: Unfortunately, a public acknowledgement of plural marriage could have brought the death of the prophet and/or the Church in Joseph's day. While lying is typically regarded as dishonest, some circumstances of survival have necessitated altering the truth. In WWII Europe, for example, some Germans protected the lives of Jews whom they harbored in their homes—and then lied about harboring them to the German authorities. Was it okay to lie to save their lives?

Chapter 7 Prophets Concerns

35) *Brigham Young taught that Adam is our God.*

Answer: The Apostle Paul said we see through a glass darkly. While Brigham Young undeniably taught that Adam was our God, he never fully developed the idea and it was therefore never ratified as official doctrine. Adam is both a title and a name. Adam is both a child of God and stands at the head of the human family. We are also taught that we can become like God and that He was once like us. Brigham Young himself once taught that no revelation is given in its perfect form—I suspect that’s because A) our minds aren’t able to handle the entire truth (almost sounds like a line from a movie), B) we have to filter revelation through the weakness of human “language” (which includes misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and assumptions, as well as worldviews, knowledge of science and other gospel principles, etc.) and C) because we may not have human words to accurately describe what we might see in the heavens.

36) *Yesterday's doctrine is today's heresy.*

Answer: There are very few things that have been described as “doctrine” that have changed since the Restoration. I am unaware of any eternal “doctrines” which have changed since the Restoration. Critics often create a list of supposed doctrinal changes which include: Polygamy, Adam God, Blood Atonement (see the next item below), Endowment Ceremony, etc., but not a single one of these concerns a *doctrinal* change—at least not if we are defining “doctrine” as those teachings which have eternal applications and are required of all humankind. The necessity of a Savior and baptism, the reality of God, the power of prayer, and the need for repentance, are all eternal doctrines and affect every one of God’s children.

If we define “doctrine” as God-given directives through prophets to the members of the Church, well then of course things will change—that’s why we have *living prophets*. The directives will change depending on what we need, what we’ve sought, and maybe what we can handle. That’s part of the “line upon line” as well as God working with our individual or collective circumstances. The fact is, that the overwhelming majority of things which have changed in the Church are policies, practices, and opinions.

37) *Blood Atonement: Brigham Young taught that some sins required the shedding of one’s own blood—that Christ’s atonement wasn’t enough.*

Answer: In concern #1 I quoted D&C 1:24 which reads: “Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding.” God has more to say on this topic, however.

And inasmuch as they erred it might be made known; And inasmuch as they sought wisdom they might be instructed; And inasmuch as they sinned they might be chastened, that they might repent; And inasmuch as they were humble they might be made strong, and blessed from on high, and receive knowledge from time to time (v: 25-28).

God knew there would be errors and but that, in time, they would eventually be corrected. He doesn't force new doctrines, corrections, or modifications down our throats. He lets us make mistakes. He, at times, lets us make fools of ourselves. It's all part of the learning process. One of the wonderful things that I really like about the restored gospel is that God asks us to use more than just our spiritual inspirations. He expects us to use our brains as well—that's why He gave each of us big globs of gray matter. A friend once likened our options for determining truth to the four legs of a table: Scripture, Modern Prophets, Personal Revelation, and Common Sense.

A) Scripture can teach how God has worked in the past, and reading scripture is a powerful means for opening the door of divine communication.

B) Modern prophets speak to us in *our* time. Not every generation needs to build an ark. Modern prophets can give counsel that may only fit our unique situations and may not really be applicable in other situations (polygamy?).

C) Personal revelation. We can't really commit fully (even in faith) to a proposition unless we have some witness (or even the seed of hope) that what we are doing is true. Personal revelation can, like modern prophets, speak to our unique situations, but with inspiration that is fine-tuned to us personally (or for those in our spheres of stewardship).

D) Lastly, we have to use our brains, our common-sense, our intellects, our gut-feelings. Joseph Smith once said,

“Knowledge is necessary to life and godliness. Woe unto you priests and divines who preach that knowledge is not necessary unto life and salvation. Take away Apostles, etc., take away knowledge, and you will find yourselves worthy of the damnation of hell. Knowledge is revelation. Hear, all ye brethren, this grand key: knowledge is the power of God unto salvation.”²¹

If something doesn't sound right to our minds, then the other three legs better be really steady or the table will fall over (it may still wobble, but it won't be safe at all if one or more of the other three legs are weak as well). The same applies to any of the other four legs. For some people (or for some circumstances) the sure and steady iron rod leads through the mists of darkness, at other times (or for other people) a Liahona points in the general direction we need to go. In those cases we have to figure out a lot for ourselves. We may stub our toes, we may go hungry (for food, information, or conviction), and we may even wander off course if we're not paying close attention, but if our hearts are converted then all those mistakes and bruises will be for our betterment.

I'm a firm believer that revealed religion works (intentionally I am quick to add) a lot like real science. There are starts, turns, and dead ends, but ultimately science—as a self-correcting discipline—prevails. The same can be said about revealed religion. Problems will be corrected as things progress. God holds us accountable for what we know—what light we have—and how we use that knowledge to bless others (which, of course, in turn blesses us).

He's not going to care if we got some things wrong because we didn't know that what we were doing or thinking was based on naïve religious assumptions that would later be corrected by newer revelation or better science. He's going to care about what we've done with the two great commandments—did we love others, and did we love God? Did we jeopardize those relationships through sin? Prophets, scripture, personal revelation, and the insights of our intellects are all designed to help us navigate through temptation, conquer sin, and to restore (at-one-ment) our relationship with the Father. Blessings come from living the Gospel and doing the work of the Lord.

Latter-day Saints believe in Baptism for the Dead. Why? We believe that a just God doesn't punish His children for not knowing about the gospel. All of us are judged by the light we have and if our intentions, our hearts, are working with or against an alignment with the Light of Christ. Did we find room in our heart for love and growth, or did we shut out others and the soft whisperings of the spirit because we wanted our heart for ourselves and were not willing to sacrifice our own desires by serving others.

That's why God says, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40). Elder Dallin Oaks says it's not about what we've done, but what we've become. It's about changing into better people, becoming new creatures in the image of Christ. This change comes individually but is motivated, strengthened, and supported by the programs found in the church—not by getting all the details right or wrong. "I never hear of a man being damned for believing too much," said Joseph Smith, "but they are damned for unbelief."

38) Brigham Young taught that Polygamy is necessary for exaltation.

Answer: "My Pa always said 'Never trust a Hogwallop!'" (Pete, *O Brother Where Art Thou?*). Quotes used to support the claim that only polygamists will be exalted are always taken out of context—a context which also mentions the exaltation of those who did *not* engage in polygamy as well as those who did.

39) Blacks were banned from having the priesthood.

Answer: Quite frankly, we don't know fully why black members were banned from the priesthood during the early days of the Church. Joseph Smith didn't ban them and a few black members, such as Elijah Abel, were ordained in the earliest years of the restoration. It appears that Brigham Young, interpreting doctrine according to his Protestant upbringings, was responsible for the ban.

Like all people (and I *do mean all people*), Brigham Young (and other early Church leaders) tried to support their already pre-determined views with what they saw as evidence that strengthened, or justified, their position. Every human makes decisions based on reasons that are often non-rational, and then they try to rationalize or support their decisions with evidence they can muster to confirm what they already believe.

Unfortunately, it wasn't until later generations questioned some of the supporting "evidences" that it became apparent that the evidence did *not* favor the earlier Protestant views that black members were somehow cursed by God. This, in turn, gave Church leaders reason to question the ban and to ask the Lord for direction. When people are ready *and ask*, the Lord is able to respond.

This "ask and receive" counsel, it should be noted, is again limited to our personal areas of responsibility. Because I'm not the bishop, I don't receive revelation for my ward. The bishop doesn't receive revelation for the Stake, and the Stake President doesn't receive revelation for the entire Church. Now, can I receive inspiration for ways to help my bishop? Can the bishop receive revelation for suggestions to help the Stake President? Sure. There is nothing wrong with using our minds, talents, and personal inspirations to offer suggestions for those who administer to a larger sphere than our own. But *their* calling and keys entitle them the authority to not only accept or reject our advice, but to also decide if the suggestions have merit.

There are some Church members, for example, who badger Church leaders to come around to their way of thinking. If they have some suggestions, the Church doesn't chastise members for voicing their thoughts in a respectful and humble manner. When such persons seek to create a movement, however, to claim that they know more than the Prophet and that the Brethren are either being led astray or are turning their backs on what God really wants (at least in the protestor's mind), then such a person may be called to meet with their local leaders to discuss intent and motive.

40) Mark Hofmann fooled prophets who should have had the spirit of discernment.

Answer: There is no doctrine that a prophet will discern the evil or treachery in all people (or even in most or many people). While the Lord can certainly inspire any member to avoid someone or some situation, as a general principle He is more likely to answer our queries and petitions. Unless we ask we may not receive.

41) Why follow a prophet if he's just a man of his times/day?

Answer: Prophets are both men of their day as well as spokesmen for God's word. All of us are able to receive revelation that a prophet speaks for God and all of us are able to receive revelation for our individual spheres of stewardship (and for those things which are expedient for our salvation [D&C 75:10]). A prophet's stewardship includes directives that are not included in our own individual sphere of stewardship.

Chapter 8

Kinderhook Plates and Translator/Seer Claims Concerns

42) *The Kinderhook Plates fooled Joseph Smith into making a false translation of a fake writing on fake plates.*

Answer: There is no evidence that Joseph attempted to translate these plates by way of revelation. Studies indicate that Joseph took an initial academic interest in the plates. Like any normal human might be, he was intrigued by them. Having already worked with several ancient documents—the golden plates and Joseph Smith Papyri—he wondered if the Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar he was working with might provide a clue to their translation.

Sending for a copy of his Egyptian alphabet notes, he suggested a possible interpretation of one of the Kinderhook characters—a character that looked very similar to what he had in his Egyptian study papers. That was it. No seer stone and no revelation. God didn't tell Joseph to acquire the Kinderhook plates and there is no evidence, beyond the one initially suggested academic reading, that Joseph made an attempt to pursue the plates any further. They apparently didn't excite him a whole lot as he had more important things on his hands—things *which actually did* come from revelatory sources.

Chapter 9

Testimony/Spiritual Witness Concerns

43) *Every major religion teaches that God bore witness to their beliefs/prophets/scriptures.*

Answer: The Spirit can teach all people truth for which they are prepared (all according to their own “language” and “understanding”). All that is good comes from God and if any righteous person seeks to do good, God will give them the truths that lead them to that goodness. Mormonism asks others to bring all of their spiritual manifestations and then add to them by embracing the additional blessings that can be had in the restored gospel.

Critics imply (or outright claim) that non-Mormons receive spiritual witnesses to things that cannot be harmonized with the witness received by Mormons. Nonsense. While it’s certainly possible that someone might claim to receive a spiritual witness that Joseph Smith was a fraud or that the Book of Mormon is a work of fiction (and to those people I would simply say, “Follow the dictates of your own conscience”), few non-Christian religions ask their members to seek spiritual witnesses for anything. Most non-Christian religions don’t ask their follower to pray to know if their holy books or doctrines are true. They may receive an unsolicited testimony of truth in their books or doctrines, but that’s likely because there is much truth in most religions of the world.

A Christian may ask to know if the Bible is true, and good for them. How does that prove that the Book of Mormon is false? A Catholic may ask to know if the Pope is led by God. I believe he is. A Protestant may pray to know if her minister is led by God. An affirmative answer is probably a good sign that they are.

In 1978 the First Presidency, under the leadership of Spencer W. Kimball, published the following:

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, 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.²²

God knows that His children are all different and that what works for one may not work for all. He also knows that we are all at different individual levels of spiritual understanding, devotion, and exploration. As we read in James:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father.... (1:17).

One of the special things about Mormonism is that we don’t claim to have the corner on truth. Joseph, in fact, said: “One of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive

truth, let it come from whence it may.”²³ You can’t receive truth from “whence it may [come]” if you already have all truth or expect it to come only from established sources.

The LDS Church *does* claim to have authority which is unique to Mormonism. We claim, for instance, to have a prophet whose sphere of stewardship—the family for which he is authorized to receive revelation—is the entire human family. A pastor can receive revelation for his congregation. The Pope can receive revelation for Catholics. A mother can receive revelation for her family.

All of these people can receive revelation for their realm of stewardship—and all within the confines of their own “language” (which as noted before includes gospel understanding). Obviously, if they have not accepted revelations given to modern prophets or for unique LDS scriptures, then some of their gospel understanding may be curtailed. This doesn’t prevent them from receiving revelation but it does limit their ability to understand certain revelations or to obtain revelations on things for which they are not prepared (back to the algebra after basic math analogy).

The second unique thing about Mormonism is authority—heavenly endowed keys which authorize and ratify covenants between God and His children. While the covenants are a necessary part of becoming like the Father and the Son, the Lord knows that not everyone will get the chance in this life to understand and reject or accept these covenants. His plan, therefore, includes an option for those who may need to make the choice in the afterlife.

These unique elements of Mormonism in no way minimize the spiritual power, direction, and influence of righteous non-Mormons. While critics try to make it an us vs. them dispute, nothing could be further from the truth.

44) It’s arrogant to deny others’ spiritual experiences.

Answer: See above. We don’t deny such spiritual experiences. We accept them. Joseph Smith said, “Have the Presbyterians any truth? Yes. Have the Baptists, Methodists, etc., any truth? Yes. They all have a little truth mixed with error. We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true ‘Mormons.’”²⁴

45) Feelings are an ineffective way to determine God’s truth.

Answer: I might ask what method would be more effective in determining God’s truth? A scientific test, perhaps? A discussion addressing this query in detail is far beyond the scope of this booklet, but it should at least be pointed out that a scientifically proven God opens all kinds of other weird dilemmas regarding agency, a collapse of God’s plan for His children, and the simple fact that *no scientific evidence* can convince (will compel) every person to accept a truth—it ain’t happenin’. I know there will be some who might disagree with me on this point, but for those, I’ll just have to say—wait for my next book when I discuss this issue in greater detail.

A spiritual witness is more than just feelings. Spiritual things—including the existence of God and the reality of the Resurrection and Atonement—cannot be tested under a microscope.

Spiritual things must be spiritually discerned. Can we know spiritual truths without feelings? Science tells us that all of us use feelings all of the time in determining truth. It's just plain hooey to think that smart people only use logic and rationale in making important decisions and in determining what they choose to believe.

46) Joseph Smith received a revelation to obtain a Canadian copyright for the Book of Mormon but failed—i.e., his prophesy failed and therefore he was a false prophet.

Answer: Balderdash! (I could say baloney again but I like using these fun old-fashioned terms instead.) The revelation on securing a copyright in Canada was conditional. Basically God said that they would be successful if the people in Canada didn't harden their hearts. They did, and the copyright wasn't secured. God doesn't force us (or anyone) to conform to what's in our best interest. We all have the agency to reject God.

47) After the failed Canadian copyright prophecy Joseph told David Whitmer that some revelations are from God, some are from the Devil, and some come from our minds. How are we supposed to be able to tell the difference if he couldn't?

Answer: David Whitmer made this claim 57 years after the event occurred (let's sample *your memory* 57 years later and see how accurate it still is on the specific words of a conversation). It's also important to remember that Whitmer never returned to Mormonism and believed that Joseph Smith was a fallen prophet. Intentionally or unintentionally our minds reconstruct our memories to fit what our positions are when we attempt to recall the event. In Whitmer's case, he undoubtedly would have painted Joseph with a brush that colored him as a fallen prophet—that brush would have included Whitmer's selection of wording when reconstructing Joseph's attitude on his failure to secure the Canadian copyright.

48) Paul Dunn was a lying General Authority. Many members felt the spirit when he spoke despite the fact that the stories were false.

Answer: Paul Dunn made some unfortunate errors in judgment. While *some* of the stories he told were fabricated or embellished, the principles he taught were true. Jesus deliberately told fictional stories—parables—yet I'm sure that many of his listeners felt the Spirit testify to the truths of the doctrine He was teaching. The Spirit testifies to the truth of those things which ultimately lead people to God, not to ancillary details—fictional, embellished, or misremembered—which serve as mere vehicles for the larger message that they are used to convey (see, for example, my discussion on the Old Testament in #79).

49) Many members have made bad life decisions based on inspiration.

Answer: We are taught to make decisions by study and also by faith (D&C 88:118). As Oliver Cowdery learned when he attempted to translate the plates, we are expected to work out our issues first, then turn to the Lord to see if we've come to correct decisions. When we rely on only some of the available tools that the Lord has given us, it may decrease the likelihood that our

decisions are the ones which God would recommend. It's also important to remember that sometimes things that look like failures to us are events that lead us in inspired directions. The Smith family's Vermont crop failure, for example, is what caused them to move to Palmyra, New York, where Joseph was able to retrieve the Book of Mormon plates.

50) You can feel the "spirit" watching a touching movie.

Answer: A witnesses of the spirit isn't just something that makes you feel good or cry, it often affects both the heart and mind and brings a sensation to both that is different than the tears that are brought on by a sad or feel-good movie or book (see my four-legged table metaphor above).

Chapter 10

Priesthood Restoration Concerns

51) *Joseph and Oliver didn't teach about the priesthood restoration until 1834 (instead of 1829 when it supposedly happened).*

Answer: Interestingly, it was from Oliver, not Joseph, that we have our first recorded comments about the priesthood restoration. It's pretty hard to always know when things were discussed. The best we can do is know when something is put into print—even that may be difficult because it assumes we have all documents, journals entireties, etc., which discuss an event.

As early as 1830 we have a non-LDS newspaper which observed that Oliver claimed to teach by “authority,” and that, after conversing with angels, he and his associates were the only ones to have this necessary authority.

52) *Joseph changed the wording of revelations—after the fact—to include revelations about the priesthood restoration that weren't in the original revelations.*

Answer: And? Joseph felt that revelation and restoration was an ongoing process. Additional light drives away shadows. Since both the initial revelation and subsequent revelations on the topic both came from God, how is it wrong to modify past scriptures by updating them with additional insights? I'm always amazed that some critics (which are often former Mormons) seem to think that Latter-day Saints should take a Protestant *closed-book* approach to the scriptures.

Protestants believe that the New Testament was delivered once and for all in its final form during and shortly after Christ's ministry. LDS believe that like the Restoration itself, scriptural recording is an on-going process. *We don't believe that the scriptural doors are shut!* Former members and critics may acknowledge this aspect of LDS belief, but for some reason their view of an open canon seems to consist only of “adding” to scripture—like adding another section to the D&C.

A prophet can also clarify and correct information. Joseph Smith did this with all scripture in his day—and it wasn't done in secret, so he wasn't trying to pull a fast one. He understood that more revelation would come and that these new insights often required an update to what was recorded. The author of the CES Letter regularly updates his “letter” for what I'm sure he sees as similar reasons—revisions necessary to clarify, update, or correct past claims. His fundamentalist slip is showing when he assumes that human interaction with God works on a more infallible level.

53) *The Priesthood restorations weren't recorded in the 1833 Book of Commandments even though they took place before the book was printed.*

Answer: See above

54) *In the 1835 D&C Joseph retrofitted the priesthood restoration stories to the past timeline.*

Answer: See above.

55) *David Whitmer said he never heard that an angel had ordained Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to the Aaronic Priesthood until 1834 and he didn't believe that it had happened.*

Answer: Whitmer did acknowledge that Oliver and Joseph were ordaining members to various priesthood callings; he just wasn't familiar with the fact that they had received their Aaronic priesthood ordination from John the Baptist.

Chapter 11

Witnesses Concerns

56) *The Book of Mormon Witnesses all had a magical world view that preceded their “visions.”*

Answer: A lot of people in Joseph Smith’s day/vicinity believed in what some today call “magic.” That’s like saying a lot of people today believe in God. So what? Scholars typically avoid terms like “magic” because of the negative connotation. It’s used far too frequently (at least in the discussion of religion) as a pejorative—what I do is religion, what you do is magic. As a rule of thumb it appears that God speaks through revelation to the mind—with a “still small voice.” Someone who believes that such things are possible is probably going to be more receptive than someone who would brush things off as hallucinations, etc.

57) *In 1826 Joseph was brought to court in Bainbridge, New York, for trial on charges of fraud. He was arrested on the complaint of Josiah Stowell’s nephew who accused Joseph of being a “disorderly person and an imposter.”*

Answer: Stowell hired Joseph to do some digging for buried treasure. It was believed that Joseph could see the location of lost articles by way of a seer stone (this was, it should be remembered, before Joseph Smith acquired the Book of Mormon plates). Stowell’s sons weren’t too happy that their dad was giving money to search for lost treasure and therefore had Joseph brought to court on charges of fraud.

While Joseph Smith never had any luck finding buried treasure, some of the townspeople believed that he did, indeed, have the gift of a “seer” and recounted tales of how he had once found a lost tooth pin in a pile of straw, and how he was able to describe houses and trees hundreds of miles away (all which were verified by people who had actually seen the places being described).

Whether or not Joseph Smith could see such things is irrelevant to the fact that both he and those who hired him *believed* that he could see such things. Someone can believe something and be wrong, but sincerely believing in something wrong doesn’t make that person a con artist or fraud (and we can’t necessarily rule out the possibility that he did indeed *see* lost objects in his seer stone despite the fact that such things run contrary to modern scientific sensibilities).

It’s easy to sit in an ivory tower and poke fun at the gullible 19th century bumpkins who believed in dowsing and seer stones, but the truth is that many people today still believe in supernatural things that can only be taken on faith. According to various polls, for instance, nearly half of Americans believe that the body can be healed by psychic, spiritual, or mind powers.²⁵ Nearly half believe in ESP.²⁶ Nearly 6 out of 10 believe in ghosts,²⁷ and nearly 1 in 5 Americans claim they’ve seen a ghost.²⁸ Nearly 1 in 3 believe they have felt in touch with someone who has died,²⁹ and an equal number believe that a power exists to see into the past or the future.³⁰ Ironically, despite fewer Americans laying claim to organized religion, belief in the supernatural seems to be rising.³¹

While some might brush this off as the delusions of an uneducated public, I also find it interesting that 1 out of 3 atheists and agnostics believe in some sort of afterlife and that 6% of this group believes in a bodily resurrection.³²

Now this is certainly not the place to discuss the existence or “proof” of God, the supernatural, and so forth. It is, however, important to point out that even in 21st century America, with all of our scientific advances, declining Church attendance, and adulation of big name atheists like Richard Dawkins, the fact remains that a large percentage of Americans still believes in some things that can only be described as supernatural (or “magic” if you want to tweak someone’s religious nose). In Joseph Smith’s day, the percentage of sincere believers in the supernatural was, I’m certain, much higher. Believing in the supernatural doesn’t make one a fraud.

While critics like to claim that Joseph Smith and his followers were easily fooled because they were gullible, another interpretation might be that they were open to receive divine revelation because they were receptive to such communications. While we know that at least in some instances God can smack non-believers on the head with a club of spiritual manifestation (see Alma the Younger, Paul, and surprisingly more than a few former modern-day critics), it only seems reasonable that those with hearts open to spiritual experiences are more likely to receive manifestations than those whose hearts are hardened to spiritual promptings. As the Apostle Paul said,

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned....

But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty (1 Corinthians 2:14, 1:27).

58) D&C 8:6 says that Oliver Cowdery had the “gift of Aaron.” Now we find out that this meant he had the gift of using a dowsing rod.

Answer: It was not uncommon—among the educated as well as the religious—to believe in divining and “magic” in Joseph Smith’s day and vicinity. A number of people today (even intelligent Americans) believe in water dowsing, astrology, etc. The people of biblical times also believed in non-scientific practices and worldviews. The Lord speaks to us in our language so we can understand and grasp what he wants us to know and do. The belief in the supernatural probably made Joseph and Oliver more receptive to revelation and the translation of ancient documents through the use of supernatural tools.

59) The Witnesses believed in Second Sight or the ability to see things “in their minds.”

Answer: Although our eyes collect data and light, vision takes place in the brain. How does

one explain a “vision” of a supernatural experience? The witnesses consistently testified that what they saw and experienced was real (as real as seeing your own hand) but they were at a loss as how to explain something that ultimately came from another world or dimension.

60) *The Witnesses were unreliable, unstable, and gullible.*

Answer: The fact is, the Witnesses never denied their testimonies of the Book of Mormon. Never. They could have, and life would have been much easier. All of the Three Witnesses were, at one time, on the outs with Joseph Smith and the Church. David Whitmer never came back. Many of the Eight Witnesses were eventually at odds with Joseph Smith and the Church; some never came back. It would have been easy to say, “I was conned! Joseph Smith is a brilliant and manipulative devil [some of the Witnesses did say very nasty things about Joseph Smith]. I should have known better, but he got me. My bad.”

People would have been forgiving and would have seen these former Mormons as victims. The hard feelings that the non-Mormons might have once had for the Witnesses’ participation in the (supposed) cons, would have been swallowed up in exuberance for turning state’s evidence on the man they really detested—Joseph Smith. Any witness who had come forward to expose the con and deny his testimony would have been hailed as a hero (heck, in today’s ex-Mormon crowd those who were once former Church leaders—such as bishops, etc.—are hailed as heroes when they leave the church and claim that they were conned by their former faith). Instead, however, the Witnesses endured abuse and humiliation because they refused to deny what they had seen—even when they no longer supported the Church.

The Book of Mormon plates are the fly in the critics’ potato salad. You can’t just eat around it, you have to get rid of it in a way that still makes the salad palatable to the dinner guests. If there were no golden plates, then Joseph Smith simply made up the whole story of the Lehites and the Jaredites. It all came from his imagination—call it lies, call it delusional.

Those pesky plates, however, make things a bit more complicated. If there really were plates then they have to be explained away. Obviously, claim the critics (in an ironic twist of confirmation bias), the plates couldn’t have been real ancient engraved plates with the appearance of gold. *Something—ANYTHING!*—must have been going on here that doesn’t buy into Joseph Smith’s story.

If Joseph Smith were the only one who had claimed to see/heft the plates, then the critics could return to their default position—“it all came from his imagination—call it lies, call it delusional.” Unfortunately for the critics, a number of witnesses claimed to have seen and touched the plates, and three even claimed that they were shown the plates by an angel of God.

While the testimony of the Three Witnesses is powerful, if they had been the only witnesses to the existence of the Book of Mormon plates, then critics could claim (and they attempt to make this very argument) that the entire thing was a product of mass hallucination, clever conjuring, or hypnosis.

If the only witnesses to the Book of Mormon had been the Eight Witnesses, then we would have evidentiary support that Joseph Smith had old-looking metal plates but it wouldn't necessarily tell us that the plates contained the word of God. Having both sets of witnesses covers all the bases. Like it or not, accept it or not, believe it or not, the testimony of the Three and the Eight provides evidence that the Book of Mormon is exactly what Joseph Smith claimed it was. That clever Joseph Smith and his witnesses. It's almost like he had divine guidance in supplying the right kind of evidence.....

So back to our fly in the potato salad. Critics will tell you it's not a fly, it's just a raisin. What looks like wings is really sun sparkles glistening on raisin moisture. What looked like a fly moving are actually pieces of the potato salad settling and shifting as the mayonnaise liquefies in the summer sun. No matter how much it looks like a fly (or even tastes like a fly—yuck!) you can rest assured that it's a raisin and not a fly. How can we be so sure? Because there are no such things as flies that get stuck in potato salads—ergo, this must be a raisin.

61) Martin Harris was gullible.

Answer: Martin Harris is frequently the target for charges of gullibility. It's interesting, however, that Martin was, at times, apparently skeptical of the entire venture and needed some confirmation. He didn't part with a penny for printing the Book of Mormon, for example, until after he showed a copy of Book of Mormon characters to a respected scholar at the local university (in what became known as the Anthon episode). At one point Martin switched Joseph Smith's seer stone in an attempt to see if Joseph Smith could really translate, or was just making things up. His non-Mormon neighbors called Martin honest and industrious. The attempt to malign Martin's character is a desperate *ad hominem* which attempts to brush aside the evidentiary strength of his witness testimony.

62) Harris believed in the Shaker book as much as the Book of Mormon.

Answer: The newly restored church was like a baby learning to walk. There were stumbles and difficulties in the first few steps. Joseph Smith didn't know everything about Christ's church all at once—and probably didn't know everything by the time he was assassinated. Revelations seem to come to people like grainy images.

One of my serious passions is photography—it used to be film photography but now it's digital photography. The first digital camera was made by Kodak in 1975 and produced a 100x100 pixels image (or .01 Mega Pixels). To render a high resolution image from this sensor you couldn't print anything larger than the size of a postage stamp. A couple of decades later, cameras were capable of producing images measuring 640x480 pixels (or about .3 MP). Then, by the late 1990s, cameras began to appear with 1.3MP resolution or better. Today, your average cell phone has 16MP.

Imagine if someone gave you a print of a house produced from that first .01MP camera and told you to replicate the structure based on the photo. It would be really hard to get all the details right. Years later, as you are still working on the construction, the building contractor gives you a

print made by the 1.3MP camera. Now you are able to fill in some of the details you couldn't see before. You also realize that some of the "windows" you saw in the original image weren't really windows but were simply the way that light and shadows illuminated the house's siding. Each time you got a better photo—taken at a higher resolution—you were able to get more details right and fix more of the errors that you didn't see, or thought you saw in earlier photos.

This is kind of how revelation works with the gospel. Resolution line upon resolution line, here a little pixel and there a little pixel (see what I did there?). The image gets sharper, the fuzzy things get redefined or deleted, and the house is improved. It's still the same house, but with refinements it becomes a superior structure and a more comfortable home than the one which was erected from the first image. Joseph Smith explained this principle to his follower:

It is not wisdom that we should have all knowledge at once presented before us; but that we should have a little at a time; then we can comprehend it.³³

When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave.³⁴

During the grainy pixel season of the Restored Church (and, believe it or not, we still look forward to an ever-sharpening picture), a lot of people were trying to figure out the details of the image. This caused some to stumble and some to go different directions. Martin Harris was one of those who, in time, formed disagreements with Joseph Smith.

Martin had a different image in his head based on the first grainy photo of the 1830 church. His disagreements led him to seek like-minded people who shared *his image* of what he saw in Christ's church. With the exception of a brief episode with the Shakers, all of Martin's wanderings were linked to off-shoots of Mormonism. And even when he joined the Shakers and went out on a mission for his new church, he spent most of the time proselytizing for the Book of Mormon—so much so that the Shakers finally pulled him back from his mission.

A third-hand source accuses Harris of claiming to have as much faith in the Shakers' book as he did in the Book of Mormon. It's hard to judge the reliability of this claim, however. We have no first-hand sources from Harris himself making this claim, and the only source which makes this claim comes from an evangelical preacher who made the accusation during a debate nine years after Harris had died (which means Harris wasn't alive to correct the claim if it was wrong). We don't know the minister's source for the claim, but it's hard to reconcile his claim against the many more testimonies we have wherein Harris reaffirmed his belief in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and what he had witnessed.

63) *Whitmer said the angel had no appearance or shape.*

Answer: Bunk. Someone else made this claim about Whitmer's description and when

Whitmer found out, he went ballistic and published a rebuttal denying the charge. Although Whitmer never returned to Mormonism, he never denied his testimony, and the people of his town (non-Mormons) frequently defended (even in print) David's honor as an honest, upstanding member of their community.

64) *Oliver Cowdery was Joseph's cousin and therefore not an objective witness.*

Answer: Oliver Cowdery left the Church for many years and was no friend of Joseph's in the interim. During his absence, Oliver didn't know that he would eventually return; it would have been easy for him to claim that Joseph tricked him or that he was naïve in his youth, but he never did. He stood by his testimony even in the face of criticism while he was out of the Church.

65) *Martin Harris saw the plates with his spiritual eyes or in an entranced or imaginary state.*

Answer: These claims about how Harris described his encounter with the angel and plates were published years after Harris had died and was therefore unable to correct the record. Harris left plenty of first-hand testimonies that contradict these late second-hand accounts.

66) *Martin Harris claimed that he had not seen the plates uncovered.*

Answer: Poppycock. Martin Harris saw and hefted the plates while they were covered and saw them again uncovered in the vision with the angel. There are enough examples of his testimony to clarify that he spoke of two different events.

67) *James Strang was Joseph Smith 2.0 and had equally fascinating claims.*

Answer: James Strang was a copy-cat wannabe who hoped to become Joseph's successor after the prophet was martyred. To help gain a following, he imitated Joseph and created some metal plates. The CES Letter lists 5 "fascinating" parallels that attempt to show that his religious efforts were every bit as ingenious as Joseph Smith's. It's easy to see, however, that the supposed parallels are selected to fit into a circle obviously drawn according to the term of the "sharp shooter's fallacy" (see #9 above).

Let's note some of the remarkable *differences* between the Strang organization and the Restored Church. None of Strang's "witnesses" saw the plates in an angelic setting (as we find with the testimony of the Three Book of Mormon Witnesses). Several of the Strang witnesses later recanted their testimonies (none of the Book of Mormon witnesses ever did), and some admitted to helping create the Strang plates (something we never hear from *any* Book of Mormon follower).

Granted, some of the Book of Mormon witnesses temporarily followed Strang but that may have been more because of their disagreement with Brigham Young than their agreements with Strang. There was a succession crisis. Joseph didn't really leave clear instructions as to who would lead the Church if both he and Hyrum (who *would* have taken charge) both died. Several men stepped forward. The majority followed Brigham Young, but others tried to take leadership claim

by virtue of family ties, supposed secret ordinations, or in the case of Strang, an initial ability to show (by deception) that he, too, had prophetic powers to translate ancient plates.

68) We have no original copy of the Witnesses' testimonies that were included in the Book of Mormon.

Answer: So what? Let me get this straight... If the original to something is missing, then the original didn't exist? Here are a few other things that are missing... the Wright Brothers' airplane patent—ergo, planes don't really exist; the original nuclear bombing maps for targets in Japan, ergo, Hiroshima never got bombed. How about the library at Alexandria? This was probably the world's most complete library of the time and was said to house, at its peak, up to nearly half a million scrolls. Where are those scrolls now? Gone forever when the library burned down more than a thousand years ago. No original scrolls? Surely this must mean that the Library at Alexandria never existed.

69) All of the witnesses except Martin Harris were related to either Joseph Smith or David Whitmer, therefore they could not have been objective.

Answer: This argument means nothing. Some of the witnesses did not get along with each other in later life. There is no reason to impugn their testimonies because of their relationship—especially when they never denied their affidavits despite differences that stood between them and the Church as well as between the other witnesses. Besides, nobody is “objective”—but that is a topic for another time.

70) The mistake that is made by 21st century Mormons is that they're seeing the Book of Mormon Witnesses as empirical, rational, nineteenth-century men instead of the nineteenth-century magical thinking, superstitious, and treasure-digging men they were.

Answer: It's easy to look back on past generations and call their beliefs superstitious—future generations may do the same with some of our beliefs. Believing in spirits, an afterlife, and a divine being is already viewed as “superstitious” by some people today despite the fact that most Americans believe in such things. The Book of Mormon Witnesses believed in revelation and angels and *that* opened their hearts and minds to receive the things from God.

Chapter 12

Temples and Freemasonry Concerns

71) *Joseph Smith introduced the temple endowments right after becoming a Mason.*

Answer: The Lord uses our “language” and “understanding” to teach principles to each dispensation. While the Temple Endowment and Masonic rituals have some outward similarities (just as the Nazi swastika comes from an older religious Sanskrit symbol), those similarities don’t extend to the meaning of the rituals. The ritual is the wrapping paper; it is how the gift is presented to us. Familiarity helps convey messages and improves remembrance. If the Gospel had been restored in a different country or a different time, undoubtedly different symbols would have been employed.

Most of the important temple doctrines had already been revealed to Joseph Smith prior to becoming a Mason. Masonry simply helped facilitate the symbols (dressings) which were utilized to teach those important principles and covenants.

72) *If the temple endowment is a restoration of original Masonry, why doesn't it match earlier versions of Masonry?*

Answer: See above.

73) *Despite the claims made by some LDS leaders, Freemasonry has zero links to Solomon's Temple.*

Answer: That’s irrelevant. The *meanings* of the rituals *are linked* to early Christianity and were restored by revelation. The form of the rituals was drawn from symbols in the environment.

74) *Is God really going to require people to know secret tokens, handshakes, and signs to get into the Celestial Kingdom?*

Answer: The Gospel is a plan to change people into beings who desire and can experience everlasting joy. It’s about turning one’s heart and faith over to the Lord and losing one’s self in the service and love of others (just as God does for us). God wants *all* of His children to reach that plane of eternal joy and will give everyone the opportunity to decide for themselves if that’s really what they want.

Chapter 13 Science Concerns

75) *The Bible and LDS scriptures teach that there was no death before the fall.*

Answer: There is no official doctrine regarding the antiquity or creation of the Earth or life on Earth. We know that much of what we read in the scriptures is allegorical or symbolic. Many LDS believe in both Adam and Eve and that science is correct regarding the progression of life on Earth. Ancient societies (as well as modern societies) understood God's revelations as well as His creations from within a context of their worldviews (here we go again... their "language").

Some Biblical scholars (such as non-LDS John Walton) argue that the creation account of Genesis is based on—what he calls—a functional creation. When we “create” a committee we are not creating a physical structure but rather organizing things (in the case of a committee those “things” would be people) to populate and steward the organization.

Those who wrote the Old Testament believed that the creation was an on-going process, an enterprise in which we are intimately involved—just like a committee continues to function long after it's “created.” Instead of seeing the creation accounts like modern people read them today (as creating a product with an *Erector Set*), ancient peoples “believed that something existed not by virtue of its material properties, but by virtue of its having a function in an ordered system.”³⁵

“Creation,” notes Dr. Walton, “thus constitutes bringing order to the cosmos from an originally nonfunctional condition.... Consequently, to create something (cause to exist) in the ancient world means to give it function, not material properties.”³⁶

The function of creation was to give order, roles, organization, and jurisdiction to the cosmos—which includes Earth and all life. The story in Genesis described the organizational powers between us and God while setting a pattern to guide us in our relationship with the divine. Dr. Walton explains that the creation of Adam and Eve has archetypal significance and they stand as representations for all of God's children.

Humankind is connected to the ground from which we are drawn. Womankind is connected to mankind from whom she is drawn. In both male and female forms, humankind is connected to God in whose image all are made. As such they have the privilege of procreation, the role of subduing and ruling, and a status in the garden serving sacred space (Gen 2: 15)... Neither the materials nor the roles are descriptive only of the first individuals. This creation account gives people their identity and specifies their connectivity to everything around them.³⁷

By understanding that the scriptures are not meant to reveal the scientific and mechanical workings of the universe we are free to accept or reject pre-Adamites, evolution, and death before the fall, based on intellectual arguments instead of from a position that assumes we have infallible

scriptures and infallible ancient prophets.

76) Science has proven that there was no worldwide flood.

Answer: There is no official doctrine regarding the scope or depth of Noah's flood. Many LDS believe that the flood was localized—to Noah, the “earth” (and this is supported by how the word is used in Hebrew) would have referred to the land in his vicinity. Noah would not have known about the earth in a global sense (as we do today). If everything he saw was underwater, to his world the “earth” would have been flooded.

77) Science discredits the Bible.

Answer: The Bible is not a history book or a science book and doesn't claim to be. Ancient cultures had a much different view of literature than we have today. God did not (and does not) reveal every detail of every scientific or historical fact to every prophet (there is no need for such revelations). Biblical authors had pre-scientific worldviews and wrote according to how they understood things in their day. As Galileo said, paraphrasing Cardinal Baronius (the Vatican's librarian), the intent of scripture is “to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how heaven goes.”³⁸

Chapter 14

Scriptures Concerns

78) *The God of the Bible acts like a mad man who endorses murder, slavery, etc.*

Answer: The Bible is the “Word” of God—it was not “written” by God and not all scriptures were written by the person whose name is assigned to the book. Scholarship uses terms like *pseudepigrapha* to refer to books that were written by person A (let’s say Bill) but is attributed to person B (let’s say Frank). The Book of Frank may contain stories told by Frank (or believed to have been told by Frank), but they were recorded by Bill.

Bill might have been Frank’s best friend and jotted down the sayings-of-Frank on weekends, or he might have lived 300 years after Frank died and written down the stories circulating about Frank (or tales-once-told-by-Frank). Frank gets all the credit for writing the book and most people will never hear of Bill (in fact Bill may never have told anyone that he wrote the Book of Frank). If the Book of Frank were categorized as scripture (despite the fact that it wasn’t written by Frank) it would be because those who accepted it as scripture believed that the text of the book was God-inspired and written with not only God’s approval but by His power to help humans on their earthly odyssey.

Much of the Old Testament—especially the earliest parts—were written thousands of years after the events took place. There is some scholarly debate about whether these books were based on earlier writings, oral traditions, or the influence of surrounding cultures, but the fact is that divinely-inspired scribes recorded the events (or copied earlier records of the events) that happened much earlier. Likewise, the Book of Abraham, as discussed in #22, may reflect traditions that were written two thousand years after Abraham lived.

The Old Testament is the book of scripture which gives us the most fits in regards to the supposedly mean behavior of a loving God. It’s also the one that was recorded the furthest in time from when the events would have happened—recorded by a people who undoubtedly had to synthesize their worldview with the stories they were hoping to share.

As noted repeatedly in this booklet (and I hate to repeat myself; I *hate* to repeat myself), *all* people think, speak, act, and write—even scripture—according to “their language.” This means that Old Testament authors would have framed their stories about the Israelites, and their interactions with God and their enemies, in terms that would have harmonized with their worldviews.

Without getting too deep into a topic I’ll address more fully in a book I’m currently writing, all people see patterns—in things we actually see visually, in things we hear, and in experiences in our environment. We unavoidably and instinctively create arrangements for those patterns to try to explain to ourselves what we are seeing or hearing, or why something happens. In Old Testament times people often attributed things to God, even if God never claimed to be the author of those events. When we combine this with story-telling embellishments,

exaggerations, assumptions, metaphors, symbolisms, and artistic freedom (all of which were normal for story-telling of the day—we have to remember that “objective” history is a *very* modern approach to story-telling), we can appreciate that the loving God of the New Testament is the same God of the Old Testament, but that the Old Testament people *understood God in the language of their day*.

79) God can't stop Laban from sending servants to chase away Nephi but he can light stones for the Brother of Jared.

Answer: Typically God works through mankind by letting *them* grunt, sweat, and struggle. God provides inspiration, assistance, direction, and occasionally miraculous intervention, but few if any Christians (or theists of any kind) believe that God stands by like a magician ready to solve all problems at a moment's notice and with a wave of the hand. As part of our trial and opportunity for growth, He lets us handle things on our own until we are unable to do any more (and even then he may not intervene).

80) God kills the firstborn in Egypt except those with blood on doorposts.

Answer: It's important to remember that the Old Testament, as we have it, was recorded many years after the events took place and undoubtedly incorporates the hindsight of those scribes who penned the texts (see #78). We know from Joseph Smith that God was saddened by His rebellious children (such as with the flood) and that it was the consequences of Pharaoh's actions—despite God's repeated requests for the release of the Hebrews—that brought the deaths upon the Egyptians. We don't know precisely how the Egyptians died, how many were firstborn Egyptians, or how much of the story is symbolic.

81) God is a part-time racist, polygamist, and psychopath.

Answer: God is unchanging, but since different people and different dispensations have a different understanding of the world and have their own unique needs depending on circumstance, the Lord teaches His children according to their “language” and “understanding.” God also doesn't force truth down our throats and typically reveals answers to questions—which ultimately means that, since some questions won't be asked, some revelation is withheld until God is petitioned for direction.

Chapter 15 Other Concerns

82) *The Brigham Young Sunday School Manual doesn't even mention that he had multiple wives.*

Answer: The Sunday School manuals compile quotes and stories to help members improve their relationship with our Father as well as their relationships with fellow brothers and sisters. Each quote or story is selected based on its ability to speak to the generation and circumstances of the target audience. Stories of plural marriage might not have bearing on strengthening the faith of modern LDS audiences.

83) *Church finances aren't made public.*

Answer: While critics would like another stick with which to beat the Mormon Church, there is no obligation to make finances public. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell once said,

Church members will live in this wheat-and-tares situation until the Millennium. Some real tares even masquerade as wheat, including the few eager individuals who lecture the rest of us about Church doctrines in which they no longer believe. They criticize the use of Church resources to which they no longer contribute. They condescendingly seek to counsel the Brethren whom they no longer sustain. Confrontive, except of themselves, of course, they leave the Church, but they cannot leave the Church alone....³⁹

84) *Would a loving, kind, empathetic God really place parents in the horrible position of having to choose whether to feed their children or pay what little they have to tithing?*

Answer: Tithing is a sacrifice based upon faith. Local Church leaders regularly help financially struggling members who have food and housing needs. The Lord asks that we pay tithes and that we trust that he will provide. The Church has programs so that the faithful will be assisted with their needs.

85) *The name of the Church changed in the early years of the Restoration.*

Answer: The name changed a few times until revelation was given for the current and full name of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In the early days there were competing churches that operated under the name, "Church of Christ" (the original name of the LDS faith). To avoid confusion, the official name was changed temporarily (until revelation directed otherwise) to the Church of the Latter Day Saints while still going under the name "Church of Christ" as the unofficial title.

86) *The Church is anti-intellectual. Boyd Packer said that “some things that are true are not very useful.”*

Answer: Unfortunately, Elder Packer’s statement is true—as any husband knows when his wife asks, “Does this dress make me look fat?” Seriously, though, how is it helpful to anyone to share *everything*? Is it good for your relationship with your spouse if you tell all your co-workers about his or her weaknesses, faults, missteps, sins, or struggles? I know some people who do this and it always makes me cringe.

I see marriage as a commitment of trust. We all put on our best faces in public but we all fall short—extremely short—in our private lives. In a marriage, spouses should be able to trust that those short comings remain at home (unless, for some reason, they need to be discussed with a counselor or church leader). A home should be a safe harbor where family members are allowed to be themselves—in all their shortcomings—knowing that they are still loved, forgiven, and judged by their full being, not just by a few snippets taken out of the overall context.

I’m not suggesting lying, but there is objective reality and subjective reality. Objective reality is “there’s a rock in my garden.” Subjective reality is “there is a little rock (or big rock) in my garden.” Little and big are subjective descriptions and can mean different things to different people. While we can engage in objective reality we can’t escape subjective reality during those engagements. It’s impossible to get out of our own heads (and it’s just as impossible to fully get inside someone else’s head).

When we communicate we cannot escape painting pictures with our subjective reality. Yes, my spouse yelled at the kids this morning. Sharing this with others can influence their subjective reality—they might think my spouse is a mean parent. The yelling is true, the mean parent is not.

I’m all in favor of accurate history and I believe that the institutional Church is moving in a direction (and has made remarkable advances) of greater transparency about our Mormon history.

When Elder Boyd K. Packer made this comment he was addressing religious educators in the Church—whose primary job should be, as with other areas within the Church curriculum, to improve the faith of those who participate in these programs. Packer wanted to make sure those religious educators realized that lessons were taught that included discussion of the spiritual powers that attended historical events. The bare bones history without a discussion of those spiritual influences is a bit like movie popcorn without the butter (it just doesn’t taste as good).

I’m a big fan of inoculation and the need to teach all of the potentially troubling topics to Church members. It’s a fact that for many people the source and tone in which troubling information is presented has an influence on how that information is received. Members will either learn this stuff in a faithful setting or on an anti-Mormon blog on the Internet.

So my personal thoughts on Elder Packer’s comments are *subjective*. I agree that some truths aren’t useful, and I believe we have to be careful not to teach difficult topics in a way that paint a caricature of reality (focusing on the ugly warts rather than the beautiful eyes)—or to

disclose difficult topics for their shock-value instead of using the information as a real teaching moment. I do believe, however, that we *need to teach* the painful truths because they become less painful if first served as inoculation--compared to first exposure as a deadly virus.

87) *Dallin Oaks said it's wrong to criticize Church leaders even if those criticisms are true.*

Answer: Satan means “the accuser.” Criticizing leaders can lead to discord, to contention in one’s heart and eventually to apostasy—or a separation from those who can help in our journey to eternal happiness. This doesn’t mean that we can’t voice an opinion. We can, but we should make sure that our disagreements are tempered by humility and the fact that *we don’t know everything*. We should bear in mind that we might disagree, but we might also be wrong.

88) *LDS leaders warn members to stay away from the scary Internet.*

Answer: “The Internet? Is that thing still around,” (Homer Simpson). As noted above, it’s a fact that the source of information can affect not only one’s estimation of its accuracy but how the information is received. In reality, the LDS Church has embraced the Internet with gusto and has asked members to use the Internet to spread the Gospel. Leaders correctly warn, however, that much of what is posted on-line can be deceptive, inaccurate, and blatantly false. Because some Internet sites masquerade as wolves in sheep’s clothing, the Church is simply warning members of the possible dangers.

89) *The Church goes after members who question.*

Answer: The Church doesn’t go after questioning members. Those who produce material that rejects official Church doctrine, and those who organize in attempt to force the Church into changing doctrine or practice, will often be called upon to discuss their actions and motivations with their local leaders.

90) *The Strengthening the Church Members Committee is a secret organization that hunts down and exposes intellectuals.*

Answer: Rubbish. It’s an unfortunate fact that there will always be some who will try to hurt others. We have locks on the doors of our homes, and bars on the windows of our businesses. We see shootings at malls and movie theaters, and suicide bombings at sidewalk cafes. Not all threats, however, are physical. Some would like to destroy testimonies. One anti-Mormon website, for example, recommended that their followers put anti-Mormon place cards on the pews in their wards. The Church has an obligation to protect its members from spiritual harm—whether in the form of wolves, sincere but mistaken insurgents, or spiritual terrorists.

91) *Mormons believe that when the prophet speaks, the debate is over.*

Answer: This is not a teaching of the Church and the anti-Mormon quote that seems to

support it was made by an unknown scribe in a single issue of a Church magazine. It stands in contrast to dozens (if not hundreds) of other statements by Church leaders which claim that prophets are not infallible and that each member should gain their own testimony of those things which are taught.

Conclusion

92) *The author of the CES Letter looked for answers on official church sites but couldn't find any.*

Answer: From my experience, 99.99% of issues which challenge some testimonies are based on *non-doctrinal* issues—issues where opinions can vary and where leaders and lay members are able to share their thoughts. When there are no official doctrines, there are often no official positions. The Church, however, recognizes that people are searching for information on these non-doctrinal issues and is continuing to add responses on the LDS.org website.

93) *FairMormon, a group made up of unofficial LDS apologists [defenders of the faith], do more harm than good and have driven people out of the Church.*

Answer: Anecdotal information is not an accurate measure of truth. Many people have shared stories of how FairMormon has saved their testimonies. Anyone can come up with stories to support their view. The proof is in the pudding—do the arguments presented by FairMormon address and resolve critical issues? I believe they do.

Final Note

If you like this book, please tell your friends. It's free and you'll look like a hero sending them a link to a free book.

If you *really* like this book, send a donation to FairMormon. As I mentioned at the beginning of this work, FairMormon is an all-volunteer organization. We do stuff for free *and* we donate money to help the organization run. Believe it or not it costs money to have a website, create videos and podcasts, put on an annual conference, etc. You can help out if you like.

If you really, really like this book, get yourself a copy (or a copy for your friends, neighbors, mailman, lunch-lady) of my books *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One's Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt* and my book *Of Faith and Reason: 80 Evidences Supporting the Prophet Joseph Smith*. If you already own copies, get some extra copies. It's kind of like Jell-O—there's always room for more.

If you feel possessed of Zoolander and really, really, really like this book, come say “hi” to me at the next annual FairMormon Conference—held the first Thursday and Friday of August (typically in Provo, Utah). I'm there every year.

Endnotes

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⁵ Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 9:311.

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- ¹⁷ Jeff Lindsay, "Was the Book of Mormon Plagiarized from Walt Whitman's *The Leaves of Grass*?" <http://www.jefflindsay.com/bomsources.shtml> (accessed 29 August 2015).
- ¹⁸ Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 Vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 2:218.
- ¹⁹ See, for example, Ari D. Bruening and David L. Paulsen, "The Development of the Mormon Understanding of God: Early Mormon Modalism and Early Myths," *FARMS Review of Books* (2001) 3:1, 109-169 (available here).
- ²⁰ Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald* 26 (October 1, 1879): 289-90.
- ²¹ Quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, https://www.lds.org/manual/teachings-joseph-smith/chapter-22?lang=eng#13-36481_000_026 (accessed 26 August 2015).
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