Title  *Ignoratio Elenchi: The Dialogue That Never Was*

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*Ignoratio Elenchi: The Dialogue That Never Was*

Reviewed by L. Ara Norwood

At first glance what we seem to have in James R. White’s first book-length project on Mormonism is the evangelical answer to the claims of Mormon doctrine. In fact, Mr. White seems to have the answers to just about anything and everything a Mormon missionary would ever say. After all, he has, “over the past few years, . . . spoken with well over 1,200 Mormon missionaries in Arizona and Utah,1 and an equal number of plain Mormon folk” (p. ix). Anyone who has spoken with what amounts to over 2,400 people of one particular faith has really done his homework, or so it would seem. Alpha and Omega ministries had only been in business for about seven years when this book was written. Is Mr. White serious when he says he has dialogued with an average of 350 Mormons each year, or 29 Mormons each month, or an average of one different Mormon each day—every day—for a seven-year period? That’s a huge amount of research—in fact, it’s staggering, incredible, and, dare I say, unbelievable.2

What is even more unbelievable is the content of his dialogue. Each of the seventeen chapters is dubbed as a “letter.” These fictional letters are written from the perspective of James White, champion of Calvinism, defender of the evangelical reformed version of Protestant Christianity, as he corresponds

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1 It is interesting to note that in of each of the two missions in Arizona and two missions in Utah (a third was added in the late 1980s), there have been approximately 760 Latter-day Saint missionaries (a total of approximately 3,000) during the time that Alpha and Omega ministries was created and the book was written. It appears that Mr. White has spoken with almost half of the entire combined mission populations. I find that curious and astounding. Did he systematically attempt to stalk each and every missionary (including the sister missionaries)? Assuming he is not given to hyperbole, does not this suggest a rather unhealthy obsession?

2 Perhaps Mr. White would include in these figures each and every Latter-day Saint with whom he has had any sort of exchange, including the words, “Hello, would you like to read our tract on Mormonism?”
with a character known first as “Elder Hahn” until a dérrière a lettre number 10 causes Mr. White to address the emissary by the less-formal, less-dignified salutation, “Dear Steve.” Mr. White tries to make the last eight letters to Steve more chummy though no less preachy, perhaps in an effort to suggest to the reader that it is possible to influence even that most diehard of all Mormon species, the full-time Latter-day Saint missionary.

The book starts out with a foreword by the late Reverend Wesley P. Walters. Although brief—(the entire foreword runs a mere six sentences)—it is typical of the anti-Mormon worldview. Walters opines, and presumably James White agrees, that, as a result of reading this book, “both Christians and Mormons can see clearly how really defenseless and self-contradictory the Mormon position is” (p. i). As difficult as it is for Latter-day Saints to fathom, Walters and White are serious when they make such statements. Both men truly believe that the arguments presented are utterly devastating to the Mormon position, that all “honest” Mormons will make a mass exodus from their faith upon reading the book, and that those who choose to remain Mormons are simply biased or less than honest. This world view seems to maintain that logical argument alone wins converts, in contrast with the Latter-day Saint view, which maintains that it is the workings of the Holy Spirit that bring about conversion.

The contents of White’s letters cover mostly doctrinal issues, such as biblical inerrancy, the doctrine of God (monotheism vs. polytheism, Trinitarianism, etc.), deification of man, the grace/works issue, the deity of Christ, as well as some issues that are peculiar to Mormon thought, such as the prophecies of Joseph Smith, the First Vision, and of course, the Book of Mormon. The penultimate chapter of the book, entitled

3 I was happy to see that the Reverend Walters attached his name to a “foreword” and not to a “forward,” as he did in Charles Larson’s work on the book of Abraham; see Charles M. Larson, ... By His Own Hand upon Papyrus (Grand Rapids, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 1992), 5; see also John Gee and Michael D. Rhodes, in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 4 (1992): 93–126, for reviews of Larson’s book.

4 The fact that the largest single chapter in the book is entitled “The Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham” warrants the publication of this review essay.
"Questions from a Friend," contains a brief discussion of a hodge-podge of theological items, such as grace and works (again), three degrees of glory, baptism being essential to salvation, baptism for the dead, and the great apostasy. In every instance, Mr. White addresses questions and scriptural passages that he feels are typical of those posed by Latter-day Saint missionaries. The final letter is a rather caustic response to the imaginary Latter-day Saint mission president who presumably transferred the elder to a distant area of the mission, and who invited James White to discontinue pestering the missionaries.

The overall approach of this book is, in the words of the author, theological in nature. "The primary thrust of this work is to . . . provide a theological response to the LDS Church" (p. x, italics in original). Does he accomplish this? Not in any definitive way. His attempt at letting us look over his shoulder to experience his ongoing dialogue with Elder Hahn is instructive. Yet his letters do not really represent a dialogue at all, but, rather, amount to little more than one side of a discussion—a discussion that is controlled entirely by Mr. White. This is why the title of the book is so appropriate; these are letters to a Mormon elder. Mr. White presents us with what for him is a very safe and secure environment—a cozy nest from which he can assault the Mormon chess pieces with reckless abandon, and with absolutely no rejoinders whatsoever from his imaginary opponent. Crafting only his own letters, he controls the content and thereby easily escapes the cross-examinations which would surely be forthcoming from a true dialogue. Yet, it is interesting to see how Mr. White reacts to cross-examination and criticism in a real setting. Having studied the rather lively exchanges between Mr. White and various Latter-day Saints on the MORMON echo, I can quickly discern that the cool, mature,
polite character that he portrays himself to be in his book is just that: a character. His postings in the MORMON echo betray his true colors: a desperado who needs to win every argument at any cost, no matter how trivial.

Furthermore, since he is corresponding with what is supposed to be a nineteen-year-old missionary, we begin to see the inherent limitations of scholarly inquiry that are built into the structure at the outset. After all, how many Latter-day Saint missionaries have been through a university program that trains them to understand the intricacies of topics as diverse as sola scriptura, Calvinism vs. Arminianism, Augustinian thought, Trinitarianism, biblical inerrancy, ontological issues concerning God and Christ, various ways in which deification was understood by early Christians, etc.? No, theirs is a more fundamental and more important calling—to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified, and to teach people the gospel of repentance (D&C 6:9) and the plan of redemption (Alma 22:13). They are not concerned with academic discussions involving theological disputes (D&C 19:31), but, rather, it is their calling to help people live lives centered on God and Christ, and to be receptive to the promptings of the Holy Ghost.

Thus, Mr. White’s letters follow a rather predictable, controlled path void of the realism and dynamics which go hand-in-hand with a real dialogue. It is much like playing chess by yourself: you control the outcome and the verdict is always the same—a crushing defeat for your opponent and a sweatless, albeit vacuous, win for you. This sort of literature adds little to the deepening of one’s understanding of the dialogue between evangelical Christians and Latter-day Saint Christians and is questionable at best. It would have been much more interesting and balanced had the letters been written between Mr. White and an actual member of the Latter-day Saint Church with the proper background, but then that would change the entire outcome of the book.8

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8 It is almost a certainty that James White would claim that he has attempted to “dialogue” with knowledgeable Latter-day Saints (in a formal debate setting), but that they have either declined the invitation to debate, or
The book *Letters to a Mormon Elder* contains all of the typical anti-Mormon jabs that are part and parcel of this genre of writing. Mr. White cannot help but place quotation marks around the word “prophet” or “apostle” when referring to the Latter-day Saint leaders who occupy those positions (pp. vii, 125). Also, when referring to the Mormon concept of deity, both in reference to the Father and the Son, Mr. White consistently refers to them as “god” or “gods” with a lower case g. And, of course, there is the line about how he is not guilty of persecuting the Mormons, because, after all, he loves the Mormon people (p. 93). In this, he is merely an anti-Mormon clone, maintaining the same shape of bigotry and shallowness that inevitably come from the anti-Mormon cookie-cutter that produces such phenomena.

I

I liked the sequence of the topics covered. Letter #1 delves into the subject of how one can discern truth—an appropriate starting point for dialogues of this sort. Mr. White’s epistemology is in line with what his education has allowed him to believe; namely that if a Mormon bears testimony, the testimony should be assigned to the realm of “feelings” only, then a reply should be made that such “feelings” are subjective and unreliable and therefore must be “tested” and “compared” with God’s Word, the Bible (translation: “compared with the evangelical interpretation of the Bible, since it is the only valid interpretation”). He goes on to quote Proverbs 14:12 (“There is a way which seemeth right unto man, but the end thereof are the ways

they attach conditions that are, in White’s view, unreasonable. As an example of the latter, almost a year ago a highly respected agnostic who posts on the MORMON echo (known by the pseudonym “Dr. Pepper”) offered to moderate a written debate between James White and Malin Jacobs. Dr. Pepper posted a set of ground rules, one of which specified that each debate participant was to assume that his opponent was as sincere in his motives to serve God as he himself was. Mr. White refused to subscribe to this rule, based on his view that anyone not yet regenerated by God was totally depraved, and thus could not possibly have any desire to serve God, but could only have evil intentions, etc. The same applied to any non-Christian moderator, i.e., Dr. Pepper. Mr. White regarded any relaxing of this view for the sake of the debate as a compromise with evil that he simply would not make. Needless to say, the debate proposal died.

9 See pp. 50, 59, 75–76, 99, 237, and 265 for examples.
of death."") in an effort to convey the idea that whenever human beings experience any heartfelt phenomenon they deem to be revelatory in nature, it is unreliable at best and downright evil at worst and must be validated by the Bible to be sound: "Any man who thinks his heart a faithful and safe guide knows very little about the evil and wickedness that lurks in its dark recesses" (p. 4). Perhaps he is speaking from his own background.

On the other hand, Mr. White is convinced that his interpretation of the Bible, unlike spiritual impressions, premonitions, whisperings of the Spirit, etc., is wholly reliable and must be used to validate (or as is usually the case with Mr. White, invalidate) any claimed spiritual experience. With that logic John the Beloved Apostle should have gone back to the scriptures following his apocalyptic vision (Revelation 4–22), to make sure it squared with the then-existing Bible, the Old Testament; Paul, following his vision of the "third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2–4), should have tried to verify its validity with what is written in the scriptures; Moses on Mt. Horeb (Exodus 3:2–22) should have pulled out the scriptural writings then had among his people to see if the actual words of God clashed with the existent Word of God, and Samuel should have told the still small voice that spoke to him (1 Samuel 3:11–14) that before he could believe the words uttered, he would have to verify their cogency by searching the scriptures. Yet all Mr. White accomplishes in citing the passages he does (Proverbs 30:5–6; 13:13; Isaiah 40:8; Matthew 24:35) is to show that whenever the Bible uses the phrase word of God, he believes it is referring not to divine truth in general, but to his late twentieth-century interpretation of the sixty-six-book Protestant Bible. Of course, all this line of reasoning really demonstrates is that—according to Mr. White—since there are no true prophets receiving revelation in his church, there must not be—nay, cannot be—true prophets receiving revelation in any church. Think of the implications of believing otherwise. The problem of some people preferring ancient revelations and dead prophets over new revelations and living prophets was also faced by early Christians. As Ignatius of Antioch (c. A.D. 35–107) noted, "Certain people declared in my hearing, 'Unless I can find a thing in our ancient records [archeiois, Old Testament], I refuse to believe it in the Gospel [New Testament]'; and when I assured them that it is indeed in the ancient scriptures, they retorted, 'That has got to be
proven.’ ”10 The long recension of Ignatius’s letter adds, “For the ancient records [archeioi] ought not to be preferred to the Spirit.”11

But is a reliance on the Bible alone the modus operandi of all Christians? Eminent Roman Catholic scholar Hans Küng has an alternative view. He notes that the Protestant tendencies towards biblicism maintained that

Revelation was now identified with the unique, past result of the scriptural word, which comes into being in the biblical author through the working of the Holy Spirit. This makes the authors of the books of the Bible into unhistorical, schematic creatures, through whom the Holy Spirit immediately dictates everything. Thus every word of Scripture has a share in the perfection and inerrancy of God himself. This means that human imperfection and proneness to error have been wholly eliminated. For then the Spirit of God, who can neither deceive nor be deceived, would have to be charged with imperfection and error. This is how inspiration and the inerrancy derived from it is extended in rigorous, systematic fashion to all the individual statements in the Bible: *verbal inspiration demands verbal inerrancy.* This doctrine is still defended today—but is it still valid?12

Küng goes on to state, quite correctly, that “the New Testament Scriptures nowhere claim to have fallen directly from heaven; rather they often quite unself-consciously stress their human origin.”13

Küng’s analysis is in line with that of early Christian expert Robert M. Grant, who, in summarizing the position of Irenaeus on the doctrine of God, states: “This is to say that

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13 Ibid, 56.
God’s revelation is not completely confined to scripture or tradition.”14 And lest a third witness is required, I would turn to the very personal words of James H. Charlesworth, former head of the Pseudepigrapha Institute at Duke University,15 who, in an essay exploring Messianic themes in the Book of Mormon, wrote, “In conclusion, as I send this forth from my study, let me loose the constrictions imposed upon the critical historian and speak as a person. God did continue speaking after sixty-six books were collected and called the Bible.”16

Thus, it is hoped that Mr. White is not under the illusion that his assumptions about the inadequacies of prayer, the impotency of God to communicate with man in extrabiblical ways, or the dismissal of all spiritual experiences had by Mormons and others as nothing more than mere “feelings” void of any influence by the Spirit are by any means the consensus of all Christian believers or thinkers. What Mr. White fails to grasp is the danger inherent in trying to settle all disputes about truth-claims by going to the Bible alone for the answer. If the Bible were perfectly unambiguous, there would not be numerous Protestant denominations in existence—all different in one way or another, yet all claiming a system of belief derived solely from the Bible. It is instructive to understand how this could come about. How is it that one book, the Bible, could serve as the “infallible” foundation for a multiplicity of denominations? Hans Küng asks, and answers, similar queries:

The New Testament canon forms the prerequisite for the multiplicity of confessions and denominations. . . . But, assuming the non-integrated state of the canon, how does the multiplicity of confessions come into being? This question is not answered simply by pointing to the disunity of the canon. . . . The question, therefore, is How, with this New Testament

15 Currently Dr. Charlesworth is chairman of the Department of Biblical Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, having replaced Bruce Metzger, who retired.
canon that is, despite all of its disunity, one, did the multiplicity of confessions come about?

There is no getting around the answer: through choice. That is, Christians did not take seriously the one New Testament canon (one despite all its disunity) and strive for a comprehensive understanding of it—for all the difficulties standing in the way. Rather they used the disunity of the one canon to make a selection from it.17

Thus, to assume that one can settle the dispute of a conflict of “feelings” between two persons by appealing to the Bible is to assume that one’s interpretation of the Bible is clearly the only correct interpretation. The corollary is that when one claims the Spirit as the source of his belief system, it must not have been the Spirit at all, but rather, one’s own self-devised “feelings.” Both assumptions, part of Mr. White’s predetermined worldview, are just that— assumptions.

Mr. White is very much against the idea that prayer can be a means toward learning truth. Equating the scriptural phrase word of God with the biblical canon alone, it is clear from his writings in Letter #1 that he maintains somewhat of an anti-prayer stance as a means of determining truth, right and wrong, and God’s will. Yet, not one of the scriptures he cites ever limits the word of God to the Bible, nor does a single scripture he cites ever downplay the importance of prayer. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the classic New Testament texts on prayer (Matthew 6:5–8; Matthew 7:7; Matthew 17:21; Matthew 21:22; Luke 18:1; John 14:13; Ephesians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; James 5:16) are not cited even once in his book. Although Mr. White would undoubtedly reply that none of the passages just cited specifically claims that one should pray in order to learn the truth of something, he would be hard pressed to demonstrate that the passages prohibit prayer as a means to truth, something he desperately wants us to believe (cf. Matthew 7:7–11).

Another thought: Richard Lloyd Anderson’s analysis of the Jerusalem conference, described in Acts 15, throws considerable light on the issues involved. After citing Acts 15:28 on the verdict concerning circumcision for gentile converts (“It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things”), Anderson writes,

17 König, Theology for the Third Millennium, 73–74 (italics in the original).
Few Christians today see the implications of this powerful ruling of the Twelve. Conservatives today search the Bible for answers, but had the apostles done this, they would have required circumcision for the Gentiles, since it is commanded in the Bible. The apostles were inspired to go beyond the Bible, to reverse the lesser law given earlier and to extend the higher law through Christ. In other words, not past scripture but new revelation was the foundation of the Church of Christ.\textsuperscript{18}

While Latter-day Saints “believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and . . . that He will yet reveal many great and important things. . .” (Articles of Faith 1:8), Mr. White’s opening letter exposes the limitations of his belief. In fact, were he to write his own eighth Article of Faith, it would probably read something like this: “I believe all that God has revealed in my interpretation of the Protestant Bible, I do not believe he is revealing anything at all today, and I do not believe he will ever reveal anything great or important in the future that is not already in my interpretation of the Protestant Bible.”

II

In a sense, James White is what most evangelical anti-Mormons before him are not: articulate. He is rather adept at articulating the Protestant evangelical position in clear and concise ways. And he does so in a number of theological areas: salvation by grace alone, christology, justification, etc. In fact, White has demonstrated a talent for clearly elucidating his views with deftness on most of the doctrinal arenas he elected to enter, with one exception: the Book of Mormon. In this arena he is clearly in over his head. In fact, I was so appalled at the sophomoric analysis he rendered in Letter #8 (“The Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham”) that I wondered if he had not farmed out the assignment of writing it to someone else; it just didn’t compare to the rest of the book in terms of coherence, and it took the entire book to whole new levels of ineptitude.

The basic thesis of White’s treatment of the Book of Mormon is in complete harmony with that of the opening chapter: he will not accept the Elders’ invitation to pray about the

\textsuperscript{18} Richard Lloyd Anderson, \textit{Understanding Paul} (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 53.
Book of Mormon, in spite of the fact that, presumably, he has been repeatedly invited to do so. And so what are his remaining options? They are to rationalize and to create excuses as to why he will not pray about the matter. He writes, very confidently, “Who wouldn’t be willing to pray to God and ask if something is true? Me” (p. 158).

And then come the “reasons.” First, he asks, would we pray to God to ask him if the Satanic Bible were true? Knowing that such a statement is perfectly ridiculous since it begs the question, he immediately tries to stave off any well-deserved heat he would draw from such a comparison, and acknowledges that he is “not making a direct comparison of the two” books (p. 158, italics mine). Is he making an indirect comparison? Why? And if not, then why make such a statement in the first place? To claim he would not pray about the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon because he would not pray about the truthfulness of the Satanic Bible is a curiosity to say the least. It is like saying, I will not read pornography, therefore, I will not read Shakespeare.

Second, he surmises that asking for guidance from the Lord is disobedient and rebellious since God has already “revealed” the falsehood of both the Satanic Bible and the Book of Mormon: “So to come to God and say, ‘Lord, I know that you have already revealed that this is in error, but I’d like to ask again, just in case,’ is to test God” (p. 158, italics in original). How does he “know” that the Lord has “already revealed that this [the Book of Mormon] is in error”? Is he sure such a “revelation” is not merely his own feelings playing tricks on him? Since he claims he does not believe in any revelation that is not already in the Bible, is he prepared to show us the passage in the Bible that explicitly states that the Book of Mormon is not true? Granting that there is no such statement in the Bible, either explicit or implicit, how can Mr. White claim to “know” God has revealed otherwise, since he has already made it very clear that he does not believe in revelation outside the Bible?

He summarizes his position on this issue in the following way: “I believe that God has revealed His truth in the Word of God, the Bible, and I will not question his truth by praying about the truth of something that is opposed to Biblical teaching” (p. 159, italics in original). Now we get to the heart of the matter; he is of the opinion that the Book of Mormon is opposed to biblical teaching. It would be interesting to see if he would pray about the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon were it demon-
strated that the Book of Mormon’s teachings were compatible with those of the Bible—a position taken by a number of anti-Mormons. Were such to eventuate, I suspect that Mr. White would still not accept the Book of Mormon, claiming that since it is harmonious with the Bible, it is irrelevant and redundant. Thus, he conveniently places the Book of Mormon in a no-win situation; if it is congruous with the Bible, it is unnecessary, while if it does not agree precisely in every detail, it is rejected as being an affront to the Bible.

Sensing that this line of reasoning will not fly with many readers (both Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint), Mr. White then launches into the core of his presentation on why he will not pray about the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. He gives five reasons, since he knows that any one of his reasons taken alone would prove unconvincing to most readers, while the five taken together may overwhelm some readers and persuade them to be influenced by Mr. White’s rhetoric.

The five reasons he offers us are as follows: (1) The Book of Mormon is historically inaccurate; (2) The Book of Mormon contains false doctrine; (3) The Book of Mormon was given by a false prophet (i.e., Joseph Smith); (4) The Book of Mormon has grave textual problems; and (5) The text of the Book of Mormon has been purposefully changed (edited) in thousands of places. Do these “reasons” display enough reason, sound logic, and acuity to justify not following the one formula that would help him ascertain the book’s validity? Let us see. (One would do well to consult the words of Paul to gain an understanding of the limits of the “rational, logical, human reasoning” method when trying to comprehend things of the Spirit; see 1 Corinthians 2:11–14.)

The Book of Mormon Is Historically Inaccurate?

Mr. White gives us two central examples out of the many he claims he could present, the first involving Book of Mormon archaeology. He begins by referencing an article by non-Latter-day Saint archaeologist Michael Coe to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon has no credibility as an historical document among non-Latter-day Saint archaeologists.

I believe it would be instructive to reprint the Coe quotation exactly as White presents it in Letters to a Mormon Elder:

Mormon archaeologists over the years have almost unanimously accepted the Book of Mormon as
an accurate, historical account of the New World peoples between about 2000 B.C. and A.D. 421. They believe that Smith could translate hieroglyphs, whether “Reformed Egyptian” or ancient American. . . . Let me now state uncategorically that as far as I know there is not one professionally trained archaeologist, who is not a Mormon, who sees any scientific justification for believing the foregoing to be true, and I would like to state that there are quite a few Mormon archaeologists who join this group. . . . The bare facts of the matter are that nothing, absolutely nothing, has ever shown up in any New World excavation which would suggest to a dispassionate observer that the Book of Mormon, as claimed by Joseph Smith, is a historical document relating to the history of the early migrants to our hemisphere.19 (pp. 41, 42, 46)

So we have a non-Latter-day Saint archaeologist who does not believe in the supernatural claims of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon due to the lack of “scientific evidence”? Is that significant? If a non-Latter-day Saint individual were to come to believe in the supernatural/spiritual claims of the Book of Mormon, would not that person then in all likelihood join the Latter-day Saint church? And if that were to occur, would not that same individual lose credibility with the likes of Mr. White? It seems that Mr. White operates with standards that are impossible to satisfy: the only credible persons, in his view, are non-Latter-day Saints, who are, by definition, nonbelievers. As soon as any of the several hundred thousand non-Latter-day Saints become believers (which happens each and every year), he feels they now lack the balance and perspective which only a non-Mormon can have. Those who would support Mormon truth claims generally have no other alternative but to join the community of believers. It’s a classic “Catch-22” where Mr. White’s outlook is concerned.

But deeper questions need to be addressed. Are Dr. Coe’s comments valid? Is he correct in saying that “nothing, absolutely nothing, has ever shown up in any New World excavation which would suggest . . . that the Book of Mormon . . . is a historical document?” Is he correct in associating scientific evi-

19 This quotation is found on page 164 in Letters to a Mormon Elder. Michael Coe’s “Mormons and Archaeology: An Outside View” originally appeared in Dialogue 8 (Summer 1973): 40–48.
vidence with archaeology? A solid "no" to all three questions. Very few, if any, competent scholars today see archaeology as an objective science any more than history is an objective science. To say that absolutely nothing has ever shown up in any New World excavation which might vindicate the Book of Mormon is to make a rather misleading statement. To begin with, John Sorenson’s work on the subject certainly gives plausible archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon’s truth claims. It must be remembered that Dr. Coe’s statements are not iron-clad theorems for all people. That which would be convincing to one person may not be convincing to another—Dr. Coe may require far more evidence than would be necessary to convince most other “dispassionate observers.” After all, how many agnostic or atheistic archaeologists are convinced by evidence that turns up in Middle East excavations which Bible-believing Christians find remarkably confirmatory and faith-promoting? Both confront the same “evidence”; some are moved and some remain unbelievers.  


21 See John Sorenson, An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985). It is interesting to note that Coe’s essay appeared twelve years before Sorenson’s book was published.

22 On this note, I am reminded of a good many anti-Mormons who proclaim with great vigor that there is absolutely no archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon but a mountain of archaeological evidence for the Bible. This, apparently, serves as justification for their rejection of the former and acceptance of the latter. Apparently these same individuals forget that the Bible has been around for a much longer time, with biblical archaeology, as a discipline, being much more advanced than Book of Mormon archaeology (which is still in its infant stages). Also, the land of Israel has seen much archaeological effort, while Mesoamerica has seen comparatively little. Besides, do the critics expect to see a Nephite roadsign reading “You are now leaving Zarahemla”? Would we even know what we were looking at were we to ever unearth such a sign? See William J. Hamblin, “Basic Methodological Problems with the Anti-Mormon Approach to the Geography and Archaeology of the Book of Mormon,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 2/1 (Spring 1993): 161–97.
What Mr. White seems to feel is that if he can quote several non-Latter-day Saint archaeologists to the effect that they do not use the Book of Mormon in their field work, nor do they know of any non-Latter-day Saint archaeologists who do, then he has demonstrated once and for all that there is no historical evidence for the Book of Mormon, and hence, the record could not be valid. But what does that prove? Only that non-believers do not believe in the Book of Mormon. Besides, when did the Book of Mormon ever claim to be a viable tool for archaeologists?

Mr. White further references several Latter-day Saint archaeologists to the effect that there is far too much literature published by well-meaning Latter-day Saint members that is amateurish and overstated, and which does more damage than good. But what does that prove about the Book of Mormon? Absolutely nothing. By analogy, evangelicals such as Benny Hinn or Mike Warnke, who at one time were considered rather influential and “orthodox” in Protestant circles, are now looked upon with serious concern in the case of Hinn and downright contempt in the case of Warnke for making irresponsible statements. Would one be justified in rejecting the entire Protestant message based on these poor examples?

Mr. White makes a number of more specific charges against the historicity of the Book of Mormon. Focusing his attention on what he calls “the material culture,” he makes a number of unsubstantiated claims, on which I shall comment, as follows:

The main reason I feel the Book of Mormon is not what it is claimed to be is that there is such a mountain of evidence that it is not an “ancient record” but is rather a modern production, produced in upstate New York around the year 1830, (p. 168, emphasis in original)

If there is so much evidence, why does he not simply reproduce some of it for us in his book and let the reader judge its worth? Also, how can he be sure his “feelings” are reliable?

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The description of the Nephites and the Lamanites is, quite obviously, a depiction of an Old World culture, and it is contradictory in many important points to the facts that we know of the New World cultures. (p. 168, emphasis in original)

Where is the evidence and analysis of this "obvious" depiction? On the other hand, why would this be such a surprise? Is Mr. White trying to say that Nephi and Laman, having come from an "Old World culture," would have arrived in Mesoamerica and instantly lost any and all traces of their Old World heritage, and just as instantly adopted their Mesoamerican traditions, mannerisms, and customs in perfect totality?

Here are some examples: relevant to the warfare presented in the Book of Mormon, we note that the Nephites and Lamanites supposedly had such items as bows and arrows with quivers, swords, javelins, daggers, metal armor and shields. . . . The New World cultures lacked any kind of advanced metallurgy during the "Book of Mormon" period, so they lacked iron, steel and brass, and therefore did not have armor or swords. (p. 168)

How does Mr. White know this? Is he a trained anthropologist? Why does he not back up his claims with references? If he truly wants to know more about these issues, he should consult reputable works by authors who have a background in both the Book of Mormon and in Mesoamerican studies.

The Nephites and Lamanites supposedly had . . . horse drawn chariots. Historically speaking, this con-

25 Although Mr. White feels a strong inner need to be perceived as a "scholar," it is interesting that not one footnote appears anywhere in his book, and he rarely gives any sort of reference to back up his claims.

White, Letters to a Mormon Elder (Norwood)

The continent did not see a horse until the Spanish brought some over from the Old World; so, horse-drawn chariots would be a little difficult to build. (p. 168)

Mr. White is simply ill-informed.27

Alma chapter 11 describes a complex system of coinage. . . . Needless to say, Elder, no such coins have ever been found. The people who lived on this continent did not use a system of coinage. (p. 168)

Mr. White is here making claims for the Book of Mormon that the Book of Mormon doesn’t make for itself. Mr. White needs to answer the question where the word “coin” or “coins” is found in the text of the Book of Mormon. Again, it appears Mr. White is woefully uninformed about the issues he is trying to discuss.28

I could go on in this vein, but the foregoing should be adequate to demonstrate that Mr. White’s approach to historical criticism relative to the Book of Mormon is to select issues he knows little or nothing about, to make broad generalizations without backing them up with documentation of any kind, to fail to research the issues in appropriate works, and then to draw wrong conclusions at each and every turn.

Still, it gets worse. His second central example of the historical inadequacies of the Book of Mormon is contained in his eight-sentence commentary on the relationship of the Book of


Mormon to *View of the Hebrews*. Here he demonstrates his in-competence in ways heretofore unrealized, apparently simply parroting what he has read from Jerald and Sandra Tanner’s publications. It is doubtful he has read the many available sources on the subject.\(^{29}\) It seems certain that he has never read the actual text of *View of the Hebrews*. Had he put in the time to look into the matter himself, he would not have made some of the statements we find in his book, such as that *View of the Hebrews* “utilized the book of Isaiah in the Bible in seeking to establish the story’s basis (over seventeen chapters of Isaiah’s prophecy are to be found in the Book of Mormon)” (p. 170). What kind of rigorous analysis has Mr. White given us here? Both books utilize Isaiah, it is true. But just how significant is that? A better study would have been to compare just which chapters of Isaiah both books have in common, and which portions of those chapters they both share. The study by Palmer and Knecht cited above demonstrates that Joseph Smith did not plagiarize Ethan Smith in his use of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon. As to the charge that there are parallels between the two books, yes, there are parallels. Yet, the majority of them are insignificant, especially when compared to the unparallels that exist between the two works.\(^{30}\)

**The Book of Mormon Contains False Doctrine?**

Mr. White limits his discussion to two examples, the first being the passage in 2 Nephi 25:23 which indicates that we are “saved by grace, after all we can do.” Mr. White insists that, according to the Bible, we are saved by grace in spite of all we can do. He cites Paul’s writings in Romans and Galatians as proof


\(^{30}\) In addition to the published “unparallels” by Welch cited above, I personally found over fifty unparallels in my first reading of *View of the Hebrews*. 
of this, but he does not give us specific references from these two epistles to back up his assertions. In any event, Mr. White seems to misunderstand both Latter-day Saint doctrine and biblical doctrine (which are by no means mutually exclusive). One would think he has read widely enough to know the Latter-day Saint understanding on this passage, yet he still manages to get it wrong. Commenting on this passage, Latter-day Saint scholar Stephen E. Robinson has written,

LDS commentators are agreed that the word after in this passage is used as a preposition of separation rather than of time. The sense is that apart from all we can do, it is ultimately by the grace of Christ that we are saved. This meaning is apparent from the fact that none of us actually does all he can do.31

There is much more that could be said about the doctrine of salvation by grace, but I will refrain until I discuss later portions of Letters to a Mormon Elder which delve into the doctrine more deeply.

The second doctrinal passage Mr. White takes issue with is Mosiah 15:1–4. Here he accuses Abinadi (i.e., for him, Joseph Smith) of teaching the false doctrine of modalism, a doctrine Mr. White refers to as “a common misconception among untaught people” and also “a blatant misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Trinity” (p. 173).32 Modalism is a belief that the Father and the Son are not only one in power, might, dominion, purpose, and glory, but also one in person. Modalists would believe that the Son is a manifestation of the actual person of the Father while on the earth. Does Abinadi teach this? Not at all, nor have Latter-day Saints ever understood his teachings this way.33

32 Perhaps Mr. White should pause for reflection before castigating the Book of Mormon on this issue, especially when one considers that most Protestant Christians unknowingly describe the persons of the Trinity in modalistic terms. Perhaps his energies would be better spent if he tended to his own flock before concerning himself with those of another.
Again, Mr. White demonstrates a talent for jumping to faulty conclusions after feeble analysis.

**The Book of Mormon Was Given by a False Prophet?**

This third reason is shamefully incomplete. In a mere three sentences, Mr. White dismisses the Book of Mormon because he dismisses Joseph Smith. This is an example of *a priori* reasoning; White decides in advance that nothing good can come from Joseph Smith, therefore the Book of Mormon, having come through Joseph Smith, cannot be good. It would be interesting to see what would happen were Mr. White to “awake and arouse his faculties” and “give place for a portion” of the words of the Book of Mormon (see Alma 32:27). If submitting to such an experiment as described in Alma 32 were to convince him of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, it would be intriguing to see if the same *a priori* reasoning would enable him to grant the Prophet Joseph Smith the respect that is his due.

**The Book of Mormon Has Grave Textual Problems?**

Once again, Mr. White is feeding us pablum. He cites as anachronistic the following Book of Mormon terms: “cross,” “Bible,” “compass,” and “synagogues.” Further, he challenges the use of “Alpha and Omega,” and “Adieu,” as being unintelligible to the Nephite people. In the latter example he writes with apparent sarcasm: “In fact, the final words of the Book of Jacob (7:27) must have struck the Nephites a little strangely, ‘Brethren, adieu.’ I doubt many of them knew French” (p. 176.) Thus, Mr. White demonstrates how sophisticated he can be when he applies himself! Does he really believe that any Mormon has ever maintained that Jacob, the Nephite prophet, uttered the French word “adieu”? Since the Book of Mormon is an inspired English translation of a record in another language, does that not mean that the nineteenth-century “adieu” was the translation of an ancient word, which, to Joseph Smith, seemed roughly equivalent to “adieu”? Of course “adieu” is originally French, as are a vast number of English words, but

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it entered the English vocabulary by the fourteenth century. Indeed, the word was part of Joseph Smith’s personal vocabulary, with the basic meaning of “Fare thee well”—a very poignant and sublime valedictory statement.

The cause of all of this poor scholarship on the part of Mr. White is his misunderstanding of the translation process. He delineates his understanding of the process as follows:

I have pointed out problems with the text that would be problems only if Joseph Smith had received the words of the Book of Mormon from God Himself. In other words, if God just “gave the thoughts” to Joseph Smith, and allowed him to express those thoughts in his own words, a number of the above problems would be circumvented.

Translation is a process of rendering one language into another—it is not done by “inspiration.” Of course, it is said that Smith could not actually translate the characters on the plates, written, supposedly in “reformed Egyptian” (Mormon 9:32), but had to depend upon God to show him how to do this. At the same time, when God “inspires” someone to translate, will they then translate or will they simply get “inspired thoughts or concepts” that they are then left to render into their own language? (pp. 176, 177, 178, italics in original)

The last sentence quoted here is where he gets himself into trouble. Mr. White seems to feel that the only valid use of the term “translate” implies a literal, word-for-word rendering—

35 “Adieu” was first used in English by Chaucer in c. 1374 (Troilus and Criseyde 2:1084), and continued in use among major writers in English in every century thereafter. In the early nineteenth century, these include Scott, Austen, and Tennyson; J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, The Oxford English Dictionary, 2d ed. (Oxford University Press, 1989) 1:154a.

36 See HC 1:20: “They bade adieu to their brethren.” “Adieu” also appears in Noah Webster’s An American Dictionary of the English Language (New York: Converse, 1828) as a standard English word meaning “a farewell, or commendation to the care of God.” This matches perfectly its English usage in Jacob 7:27.

37 It is rather similar to the casual use of the Italian “ciao” to say “good-bye” in some English-speaking circles. Although adieu is indeed a word in French, it is also perfectly good English. (It is even in my computer’s English spell-checker.)
what is known as a \textit{plenary} translation. But as Nibley has so aptly pointed out, a translation is essentially "a statement in the translator's own words of what he thinks the author had in mind."\textsuperscript{38} It does not necessarily have to be "literal"—indeed, there are good arguments that a perfect rendering is difficult if not impossible.\textsuperscript{39}

Still the question needs to be asked: Why would Mr. White feel that translations, even by divine means, would preclude the receiving of inspired thoughts or concepts and then rendering them in one's own language? Is this not a type of translation? It certainly qualifies as "rendering one language into another" (White's definition above). If Mr. White has ever translated anything from one language into another (and he has), he knows that there is a great deal more to translation than simply reading a word, rendering it in another language, then reading the next word, and rendering it into the new language, and so on. There is a myriad of nuances, subtleties, reflective tones, varying emphases, etc., all of which influence how one translator might render a given passage. If Joseph Smith's mode of translation involved grasping these subtleties to a greater or lesser degree, and then rendering them into the best English at his command, that constitutes a translation. It must be remembered that it is the substance that was correct, while the form could be granted greater latitude. That is why the angel Moroni informs Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer that the translation is correct.\textsuperscript{40} Changing "which" to "who" 707 times does nothing to invalidate the translation.\textsuperscript{41} Indeed, D&C 9:7–9—the best description we have of how the Book of Mormon was translated—indicates that it was not translated according to White's plenary model.

Speculating on the method of translation, Mr. White cites a late statement by David Whitmer indicating it was Whitmer's be-

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Hugh W. Nibley, \textit{An Approach to the Book of Mormon}, vol. 6 in \textit{The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley} (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 179.
  \item \textsuperscript{39} Nibley, \textit{Since Cumorah}, 146.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} See \textit{HC} 1:55.
  \item \textsuperscript{41} In 1904, Nels Lars Nelson, "The Human Side of the Book of Mormon," 109, penned some wise words which bear on this issue: "In only one thing should we expect such a book to approach infallibility; viz., in whatever might be necessary to secure its central purpose: the keeping alive of faith in God, by portraying his providences in the annals of history, or by setting forth the truths of his Gospel in holy precept."
lie that the translation was plenary, that Joseph was not a translator as such, but a mere transcriber, that the Urim and Thummim did all the translating, while Joseph Smith simply read what he saw. In citing the Whitmer passage to the exclusion of other important passages on the subject, it becomes apparent that Mr. White is not offering us any of the rigorous analysis of which he is quite capable. He has not referenced any of the standard reputable Latter-day Saint writings on the subject either in agreement or disagreement. Does that mean he has never read them? I have to wonder how he can treat a subject so carelessly, come off so confidently, and still maintain a degree of intellectual responsibility.

The Text of the Book of Mormon Has Been Purposefully Changed (Edited) in Thousands of Places?

In this section, we get the very same arguments that have been raised time and time again by our critics, and which have

42 These would include, among others, Stephen Ricks’s 1984 paper, “Joseph Smith’s Means and Methods of Translating the Book of Mormon,” which deals specifically with the Whitmer statement, and B. H. Roberts’s 1906 paper, “Translation of the Book of Mormon”—both available from F.A.R.M.S.

been answered in numerous Latter-day Saint publications. For example, there are the same three passages (1 Nephi 11:18, 21–22) that critics always cite as doctrinal changes (adding the words "the Son of" prior to the various designations of the Father) when in fact they are mere clarifications so that the reader would realize it is the second person of the Godhead being referred to, and not the first person of the Godhead (pp. 182–83.) White knows that this is the proper explanation coming from the Latter-day Saints, but he does not address that explanation at all. Rather, he appears to be content with merely bringing up the charge.

Then there is the alteration occurring in Mosiah 21:28 where Ammon tells Limhi of the translation gifts possessed by Mosiah, yet the name appears as Benjamin in the 1830 edition. What new data, what concrete analysis does James White provide? After simply quoting the two variant readings, he asks, "Who had this gift, Elder Hahn? Was it Benjamin or Mosiah?" (p. 185.) Earlier, he lends this commentary: "The problem is fairly obvious, for Mosiah 6:5 reads, 'And King Benjamin lived three years and he died.' Fifteen chapters later, however, he is alive and well in the 1830 Book of Mormon" (p. 184.)

It is my considered judgment that James White is capable of much better than this, but, again, I find his treatment of the subject disappointing. By merely parroting the writings of other anti-Mormons and then keeping the ball in the court of the Latter-day Saint, he seems to think he can somehow vindicate

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45 White seems to be oblivious to the fact that the book of Mosiah is not a solitary chronological record, but is a composite record with timelines that overlap and are out of sequence with each other. Thus, to say "fifteen chapters later he is alive and well" is to ignore the details of the chronology, for Mosiah 6:5 takes place about 121 B.C., as does Mosiah 21:28, fifteen chapters later.

his decision not to make the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon a matter of prayer. But the issue under consideration here is not resolved by asking a nineteen-year-old missionary about it and then assuming a victory if no immediate answer is forthcoming.

Still, the question is a valid and interesting one. What is the cause of the change? Should it have been made? Who made it? These and other like questions cannot at this time be resolved with absolute certainty, but some possibilities do present themselves, possibilities which would include the following:

1. The gift to translate records was not the sole possession of either Benjamin or Mosiah2. The Book of Mormon mentions that Benjamin’s father, Mosiah1, also had the gift to translate and in fact, translated a “Jaredite” record presumably written by Coriantumr. This record was written on a large stone (see Omni 1:20–21) and is not to be confused with the other Jaredite record written on the twenty-four gold plates by Ether (see Ether 1:2; Mosiah 8:9; 28:11.)

2. We are not certain when Benjamin died. He may, in fact, have been alive when the events described in Mosiah 21:28 took place. Or, he may have been dead at that time but Ammon was not aware of it. We need to remember some of the history that led to the passage in Mosiah 21:28. We learn from the Book of Mormon that Mosiah1 was warned by the Lord to depart out of the land of Nephi. Mosiah1 found the land of Zarahemla, where he eventually became king (Omni 1:12–13, 19). After an unknown period of time, a group of people left Zarahemla in an effort to rediscover and perhaps reclaim the land of Nephi. This group never completed the trek, but another group left Zarahemla for a second attempt to find the land of Nephi (Omni 1:27–30). Zeniff was among this second group (Mosiah 7:9). When Zeniff’s party failed to make contact with their brethren back in Zarahemla, Mosiah2, who had recently taken over the kingship from his father Benjamin, sent yet another expedition out in search of whatever remained of Zeniff’s group. This latest expedition was led by Ammon (Mosiah 7:1–3). Ammon found the remnants of Zeniff’s group, which was now ruled by Limhi, the grandson of Zeniff (Mosiah 7:13). But prior to this, Limhi himself had sent a small number of men to try to relocate the land of Zarahemla. They failed to find Zarahemla, but they did discover the remains of the Jaredite nation, as well as the twenty-four gold plates containing the record of Ether (Mosiah 8:7–9). Fast-forward to Mosiah 21 which comes from the record of Zeniff. If Ammon’s departure from the land of Zarahemla oc-
curred prior to Benjamin’s death, the likelihood is very high that he would have mentioned Benjamin’s name to Limhi, rather than Mosiah2’s, even though Mosiah2 had assumed the role of king. This is because Ammon would have had greater experience under Benjamin as both a king and a holy man, and he likely would have referenced the one with whom he had had a longer history. 47 If, on the other hand, Ammon began his journey after Benjamin’s death, then he would have mentioned Mosiah as the one in possession of the gift to translate. But we have no way of knowing for certain which of the two scenarios is the factual one because we do not know if Benjamin’s death occurred before or after Ammon’s departure from the land of Zarahemla.

3. There is no hard evidence that Joseph Smith was responsible for the textual change at Mosiah 21:28 in the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon. The existing copy of the Printer’s Manuscript which was used to prepare the 1837 printing contains numerous changes which were to guide the typesetter. Although changes occur throughout the book (even on the same page where the passage in question is found), the change from Benjamin to Mosiah is not indicated. 48 Thus, we cannot be certain who initiated the change, but it is possible that Oliver Cowdery, who was largely responsible for the 1837 printing, was directly involved in it. 49

4. As indicated previously, if Benjamin was still alive when Ammon left Zarahemla, then Ammon was correct in citing Benjamin to Limhi in Mosiah 21:28. Thus, the prophet-historian Mormon would have correctly written down the name Benjamin, and Joseph Smith, the prophet-translator, would have correctly rendered it Benjamin as well. So why the change in the 1837 edition? It may have been the result of undue concern on the part of one of the early Brethren that a problem of some sort might be apparent with the name Benjamin. This concern would likely have been alleviated had greater thought gone into the issues in-

47 That Benjamin had powerfully impacted Ammon is evident from the fact that Ammon taught Benjamin’s words to Limhi’s people (see Mosiah 8:2–3).
48 It should be noted that there were additional changes made in the 1837 edition which were not indicated in the Printer’s Manuscript.
49 Another possible candidate would be Parley P. Pratt, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve.
volved. I myself believe that the change from Benjamin to Mosiah was neither crucial nor necessary.50

III

I opened the previous section of this review essay stating that James White seems to have a fair grasp of Protestant Christian theology. I think it appropriate to demonstrate examples of both his strengths and some of his limitations in a non-Book of Mormon setting. Due to space limitations, I will attempt to do this solely in the area of the Reformed world-view on salvation by grace.

Salvation by Grace or by Works?

When Latter-day Saints engage in discussion with evangelical Protestants on this issue, the discussion almost always follows the same predictable path. The Protestant views the Latter-day Saint as an egocentric who believes he can work his way into heaven, while the Latter-day Saint tends to see the Protestant as one who takes no moral or religious responsibility for his behavior. Invariably, the Protestant will reject the Latter-day Saint emphasis on maintaining a posture of action, of performing good works, of seeing sacred ordinances as essential to salvation, etc., declaring that salvation is by grace alone. The Latter-day Saint might argue that if salvation is by grace alone and that we need not do anything, then by definition every person would be saved, Christian and non-Christian alike. At this point, the Protestant zeros in on Ephesians 2:8–9 and declares that we are saved by grace through faith, meaning that after one comes to accept Christ, the grace of Christ provides salvation. The Latter-day Saint agrees that faith is a critical prerequisite, as is repentance (2 Corinthians 7:10), as is enduring to the end (Matthew 10:22; 1 Corinthians 15:2). At this point, the dialogue usually wanders off in some other direction without any concrete conclusions being reached. The nature of this exchange is altogether different than what one would encounter between a Latter-day Saint and a Calvinist.

50 Nibley seems to agree. See Since Cumorah, 7. It is also interesting to note that in Ether 4:1, Mosiah replaced Benjamin in the 1849 edition, presumably for the same reasons. I am indebted to Elden Watson for pointing this out to me.
James White writes with utter conviction on this issue. Although his views will be unintelligible to most Latter-day Saints (and many other Christian believers), they are right at home in a Calvinist/reformed setting where the slogan of choice is *God Saves Sinners.* In fact, this very slogan is repeated emphatically over seven times within three pages (pp. 310–12). White seems to maintain two core beliefs:

1. God does not merely provide a plan of salvation for his children and then reward the obedient with eternal life; rather, God decides in advance who will be saved and who will be damned. Those whom the Father predestines (i.e., predetermines) to be his elect cannot do anything to resist being saved. Those whom the Father predestines to be damned will be damned, regardless of what they do.

2. Man’s agency has absolutely no bearing whatsoever in the salvation process. Indeed, in Calvinist theology there is no such thing as agency. If man were to have any influence in the matter of salvation, then that would somehow render God impotent. “Even in much of popular evangelism . . . God does not actually save anyone, for in the final analysis . . . outside of man’s choosing, God is utterly helpless to save a single individual. Even if a person believes that God provides 99% of the plan, that still leaves the entire process up to man” (p. 310).

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51 Throughout this review essay, I will be using the terms *Calvinist* and *Reformed* interchangeably.

52 Alma 11:34, 37 indicates very clearly that God cannot and will not save people in their sins but only from their sins.


54 Should one ask what would happen if the “predestined to be damned” bunch were actually to exercise faith in Christ and repent of their sins, the Calvinist response would be that no one can truly believe or repent unless the Father wills it; no one can exercise his/her agency to accept Christ as Lord and Savior, or repent of his/her sins unless God allows it (causes it?) to happen.

55 Note the tendency to think in extremes: one percent involvement equates to “the entire process.” In the Calvinist mindset, if man does anything, he has done everything and that means God has done nothing. This attempt to give the credit to God and avoid the common trap of being self-
He quotes seven passages to back up his ideas and he insists that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that man can do to qualify for salvation. The only prerequisite that man can bring to the table, in Reformed thinking, is neither faith, nor repentance, but a sinful life. Yet his denominational position on the matter assumes that God’s will suspends and supersedes man’s agency. The Latter-day Saints, on the other hand, would agree that God is sovereign, but that his sovereignty does not compromise man’s agency in choosing to live the gospel. The Book of Mormon offers some rather thought-provoking passages on the matter of agency that are not found in the Bible:

Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil. (2 Nephi 2:27; cf. 2 Nephi 10:23)

And now remember, remember, my brethren, that whosoever perisheth, perisheth unto himself; and whosoever doeth iniquity, doeth it unto himself; for behold, ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given you a knowledge and he hath made you free. (Helaman 14:30)

The thought that some are saved regardless of what they do because God causes them [forces them] to believe and repent is hauntingly familiar to the Latter-day Saints, who are well aware of the clash of ideologies that caused the war in heaven (see Moses 4:1–6; Abraham 3:27–28; Revelation 12:7–9; Luke

centered, though noble in intention, is an example of what Jacob may have been referring to when he discussed “looking beyond the mark” (see Jacob 4:14).

56 Ephesians 1:3–12; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14; Matthew 11:27; John 6:37–40, 44–45; 2 Timothy 1:8–9; Romans 8:29–30; Romans 9:10–24.

57 I trust that James White will use this statement in a polemical vein in an attempt to show that I am admitting the Book of Mormon is unbiblical and therefore teaches false doctrine as he has asserted.

58 See also D&C 29:36; Moses 7:32; D&C 58:28; Joshua 24:15; 2 Nephi 2:11.
10:18; Jude 1:6). Any teaching that seems to rob man of his “response-ability” or his agency will be considered suspect by the Latter-day Saints.

Yet the scriptures White relies on are not the only sources on the subject. For instance, the following New Testament passages strongly indicate that Christ’s sacrifice has not made salvation possible exclusively for his predestined/foreordained elect, and also that man does have an ability to choose to follow God:

And [Christ] is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

[Christ] is the Savior of all men, specially of those that believe. (1 Timothy 4:10)

[God] is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. (Hebrews 11:6b)

And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:2–3)

59 White sees a distinction between predestination and foreordination (as do some Latter-day Saints): “Predestination is predestination—not simply ‘foreordination’ as many LDS understand it” (p. 314). But other more seasoned scholars are not as quick to create such dichotomies. One commentator, in discussing the Greek word prohoritizō [predestine], explains: “This comparatively rare and late word is used in the Greek Bible only 6 times in the NT in the sense ‘to foreordain,’ ‘to predestinate’”; see Gerhard Kittel, ed., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 5:456 (emphasis added).

60 Calvinists interpret this passage as follows: Christ is the propitiation for the sins of all of his sheep; this would include “our sins” (i.e., “our” meaning the sheep among the Jews) and also the sins of his non-Jewish sheep out in the world.; cf. Arthur W. Pink, The Sovereignty of God (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 315–20.

61 Calvinists interpret this passage as follows: Christ is the Savior or “Preserver” of all men in a temporal sense (he sends rain upon both the saved and the unsaved), but he is especially the Savior/Preserver of his sheep in a spiritual sense in that he grants eternal life to his sheep and to none else.
And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And he said unto him, . . . if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. (Matthew 19:16–17)

How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not. (Matthew 23:37, emphasis added)

Not one of these passages is ever addressed in Letters to a Mormon Elder.

It is important to remember that Latter-day Saints, like the early Christians before them, have always maintained that agency is never compromised where salvation is concerned. Professor Elaine Pagels, a deeply gifted scholar, concurs: “Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement also agreed that Adam’s transgression did not encroach upon our own individual freedom: even now, they said, every person is free to choose good or evil, just as Adam was.”62

Although Mr. White has written a fairly engaging argument for the reformed world-view of salvation, he has repeatedly demonstrated a lack of comprehension of the Latter-day Saint understanding of the issues involved, rendering his arguments somewhat lopsided. Does he really believe that Latter-day Saints downplay the grace of Christ? Perhaps he has obtained that opinion as a result of the generally pro-active approach to the gospel shared by most Mormons. But that does not mean that Mormons understate the scope of Christ’s grace, only that our focus on his redeeming grace occurs in a more private setting within the sanctity of our souls. Mormons tend to live by the maxim, “Pray as if everything depended upon God, and work as if everything depended upon you.” The Book of Mormon alone is replete with very moving passages on the grace of Christ:

Wherefore, all mankind were in a lost and in a fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on this Redeemer. (1 Nephi 10:6)

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, reconcile yourselves to the will of God, and not to the will of the devil and the flesh; and remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved. (2 Nephi 10:24)

And moreover, I say unto you, that there shall be no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent. (Mosiah 3:17)

And if ye believe on his name ye will repent of all your sins, that thereby ye may have a remission of them through his merits. (Helaman 14:13)

And after they had been received unto baptism, and were wrought upon and cleansed by the power of the Holy Ghost, they were numbered among the people of the church of Christ; and their names were taken, that they might be remembered and nourished by the good word of God, to keep them in the right way, to keep them continually watchful unto prayer, relying alone upon the merits of Christ, who was the author and the finisher of their faith. (Moroni 6:4)

After ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? . . . Nay; for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save. And now, behold, my beloved brethren, this is the way; and there is none other way nor name given under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God. (2 Nephi 31:19, 21, italics added)

But in addition to considering these very pertinent passages from the Book of Mormon, persons confronted with the ideologies of the Reformed position (i.e., the five-point Calvinist position) must ask themselves what kind of God is being worshipped.

63 Briefly, the five points of Calvinism are as follows: 1. Total Depravity of Man; 2. Unconditional Election; 3. Limited/Particular Atonement; 4. Irresistible Grace; 5. Perseverance of the Saints. These five points are easily remembered by the acronym T.U.L.I.P.
Can a Calvinist who affirms that God makes salvation for some of his children an impossibility, also say that God is love (cf. 1 John 4:8)? Can one truly say in his heart of hearts that a Supreme Being who, on a whim, seeks the destruction of some of his children is a kind, loving father (1 John 4:19; John 3:16; Deuteronomy 5:10; Luke 6:36)? Does not our reason shudder at such a frightfully depressing concept? Since the scriptures teach that God is the father of our spirits, and that we are his offspring (see Acts 17:28–29, Hebrews 12:9), since they teach that we have a parent-child relationship, would it not hold true that the parent, particularly a perfect, divine parent, would want the best for his children? Does any earthly parent in his right mind seek the destruction of his children? And if such is not the case with an imperfect parent, what could possibly be said of a divine parent?

Additional questions confront the Calvinist position. Why would a Christian with the Calvinist mindset ever think to undertake preaching the gospel or doing some sort of evangelism or missionary work? If God is totally capable of bringing about conversion and does not need man in any way, why preach? In fact, if a Calvinist desires to see the conversion of a specific individual, should not then the Calvinist direct his preaching toward God rather than the individual? One would think so.

To be fair, Mr. White addresses this very question:

Many people (not just the Mormons), when faced with the Biblical teaching of the eternal predestination and election of God’s people unto salvation, immediately ask, “then why should we go out and proclaim the gospel to anyone if God has already decided who [sic] He is going to save?” But as you can see from this passage in 2 Thessalonians [2:13–14], God has decided that He is going to bring about the salvation of His people in a particular way—through the proclamation of the gospel of Christ and the exhortation to repent from sin and turn to God. So those who accept the Bible’s teaching about God’s sovereignty do not as a result stop sharing, witnessing, and working to bring glory to God. (pp. 317–18, emphasis in original)

This weak explanation makes about as much sense as an episode out of Twin Peaks; the fact that he offered an explanation at all does not strengthen his position, but rather, in this
case, weakens it. If God has truly decided in advance that he is going to destroy some of his children (the way a painter decides to destroy some of his works of art) and save others, does James White expect us to believe that he cannot accomplish his designs unless his pawns preach the gospel? Earlier White has made it clear that man cannot contribute anything to the salvation process without robbing God of the glory. Now, White assures us, God in fact does need us to bring about the salvation of others by preaching the gospel.

Other questions could be raised as well: Does God actually set up a system wherein the agency of man is null and void? Can we not really choose to believe or repent? Is it really entirely up to God’s will that we do God’s will? And finally, what kind of a system is it that condemns some in advance and rewards others in advance? Could such a plan, void of chance, void of hope, void of any opportunities for real growth, be described as anything other than a sham? These and other like issues James White would do well to address.

IV

So what value, if any, does White’s book contain? For the Latter-day Saint audience, the only real value of the book is its clarity in articulating anti-Mormon arguments that are all too often opaque. Whereas the vast majority of our critics are so angry that they cannot see straight (resulting in an incoherent, murky drone), James White has been able at least sound clear, and his arguments, though incomplete in places, are easy to follow. Has this type of literature earned a spot on our bookstore shelves? Not likely, unless one wishes to place the book in the

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64 For a more reasonable explanation of this position, see J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978). To his credit, Packer acknowledges that his conclusions are not the only ones possible: “No opinion on any subject [found herein] can be regarded as the only one permissible” (8).

65 This is one analogy that has been used by Calvinists to try to soften the shock to our sensibilities that God would actually set out to destroy some of his children, not on the basis of what those children do, but on the basis of his good [?] pleasure.

“Mormon Fiction” section, alongside copies of Charlie, Sam, and The Windwalker. But we should not count James White out. Although he is young and unable to conceal his naivété in some places, my paraphrase of Alexander Pope’s axiom may well apply to the aspiring scholar: “My ability to produce sound scholarship is a result of my experience; my experience is a result of my having produced shoddy scholarship.” I believe that when James White matures a bit, we may expect good things from him, rather than the warmed-over “Tanner” trivialities he has reworked.

James White’s book is a manifestation of a common assumption on the part of anti-Mormons, namely, that if they (the critics) can simply conceive a challenge or a query, if they can but spot a supposed contradiction between anything Mormons believe and anything else, then they (the critics) have us; they think they have “won” and have vindicated their rejection of the Restored Gospel. When these same critics hurl these questions upon an unsuspecting missionary or unprepared or uninterested member, and no decisive response is immediately forthcoming, the anti-Mormon mind begins to set like cement. But when these mental models prevail, distinctions begin to blur, and logic as well as charity is often the first casualty. Thus, what results is a series of arguments that are sloppy, misleading, warmed-over, rudimentary, incomplete, and therefore irrelevant. He claims that “The Bible does not change” (p. 5) when the Bible has changed. He claims “There are a lot of different attitudes toward the Bible amongst Latter-day Saints” (p. 11) when he can only cite two different attitudes. He describes Mormon beliefs as polytheistic (p. 51) when he knows the term “plurality of Gods” is the more accurate nomenclature. He describes the Mormon concept of God in misleading terms, such as “God is simply further ‘advanced’ than man in his present state” (p. 53), ignoring virtually all of the pertinent Latter-day Saint writings on the subject, which describe God in words filled with adoration and awe.67

Concerning Jesus, he writes, "Jesus Christ, as a resurrected being today, is a god in Latter-day Saint thought. But, it must be honestly recognized that he is simply one god among many, many gods" (p. 265). In this, I am tempted to believe he is deliberately misleading his readers; I just can't believe he is that out of touch.68

White describes Joseph Smith as a false prophet because some of his prophecies have not yet come to pass (reminiscent of 3 Nephi 1:4-9), claiming that "If a person presumes to speak in the name of Jehovah, he must be completely accurate in what he says... Just one false prophecy disqualifies one from being a prophet of God... The prophets of God are accurate in... their prophetic utterances" (pp. 98-99, emphasis in original). Yet, in addressing the issue of Jonah’s prophecy against Ninevah not coming to pass, White, with a knack for circular reasoning, replies, "Remember that a false prophet is one who speaks a word in the name of the LORD that God did not command him to speak. God commanded Jonah to say what he did for a specific purpose... There is no relationship between Smith’s prophecies of events and Jonah’s proclamation of the destruction of Ninevah" (pp. 142-43). Why? Because God didn’t command Joseph but he commanded Jonah? All that can be said of such reasoning is: "Oh."

While attempting to show that various Latter-day Saint leaders believed in and practiced blood atonement, he claims he "will let [the citation] speak for itself" (p. 281). Yet he simply pilfers his references, not from the original Latter-day Saint sources where they are found, but from existing anti-Mormon sources which quote them out of context,69 offering no concrete analysis in the process.70 Further, he criticizes Joseph Smith for never once heard God spoken of in the terms Mr. White says we use to speak of him.

68 Is he unaware of Elder Neal A. Maxwell’s supernatural writings on the Savior; see, in particular, Even As I Am (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), or Stephen R. Covey’s engaging book, The Divine Center (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982)? Is he really that ill-informed?

69 Presumably, James White has obtained his citations from Bob Witte, comp., Where Does It Say That? (Safety Harbor, Florida: n.d.) which does, in fact, contain all of the citations White has reproduced in his book.

70 He also demonstrates a lack of care and accuracy by attributing a quotation to Brigham Young that is actually a quotation of Jedediah M. Grant (JD 4:49).
his belief that animal sacrifice will be reinstated in the future (p. 287), apparently believing that Joseph Smith is referring to the Mosaic rituals. (White tries to refute this alleged Latter-day Saint belief by referring to the Epistle to the Hebrews, an epistle whose main purpose was to show the supremacy of Christ over the law of Moses.) Quoting the Prophet Joseph Smith from the Documentory History of the Church 4:211, White leaves out key passages (such as the following) which clarify Joseph's explanation on the matter:

We frequently have mention made of the offering of sacrifice by the servants of the Most High in ancient days, prior to the law of Moses. . . . It is not to be understood that the law of Moses will be established again with all its rites and variety of ceremonies; this has never been spoken of by the Prophets; but those things which existed prior to Moses' day, namely, sacrifice, will be continued.\(^\text{71}\)

As long as James White continues to treat Mormonism with the carelessness he has demonstrated in this work, he will be doomed to be classified alongside other common anti-Mormons—bigots who have neither the know-how nor the Spirit to comprehend the Kingdom of God, ever learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth, for the love of truth is not in them. Nels Nelson puts it this way: "He who scorns to drink deep of the truths flowing from God through this record, because of its homely channel, deserves to perish of soul-thirstiness."\(^\text{72}\) Thus, unless Mr. White is able to learn to approach Mormonism differently than his anti-Mormon predecessors do, I fear that he will continue to climb the proverbial

\(^{71}\) HC 4:211-12, italics added.

\(^{72}\) Nelson, "The Human Side of the Book of Mormon," 115. This sentiment brings to mind an encounter I had with a member of Alpha and Omega ministries some years back. After being accosted by this individual outside Temple Square, I was told he would join the Latter-day Saint Church if I would but answer one simple question. The specific question escapes me now, but I recall that it was anything but simple, requiring about 70 seconds to pose and having to do with the architecture of the temple. Upon hearing the completion of the question, I simply replied, "I am not going to answer that question." My inquisitor asked, "Why not?" I replied, "Because I am trying to keep people like you out of the Latter-day Saint Church!" I have since come to learn that charity is to be preferred to well-deserved comebacks, a verity I am still trying to internalize.
ladder of "success," only to find upon reaching the top rung that it was leaning against the wrong wall.