The Current Battle over the Book of Mormon: “Is Modernity Itself Somehow Canonical?”

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Reviewed by Louis Midgley

The issue is nothing less than the very definition of Mormonism, who decides its nature.

Allen Dale Roberts (1993)

I will focus attention on the polemical nexus behind New Approaches to the Book of Mormon, and on Anthony A. (Tony) Hutchinson’s opinion that the Saints should understand the Book of Mormon as “inspired” fiction rather than simply true. I will ask whether Hutchinson’s position is the preferred stance of the editor of New Approaches or of the owner of Signature Books. I will not examine the details of the arguments set forth in New Approaches other than those advanced in my friend Tony Hutchinson’s “The Word of God Is Enough,” and in Brent Lee Metcalfe’s “Preface.” I will argue that the position advanced by Hutchinson cannot and should not be taken seriously by thoughtful and faithful Latter-day Saints.

Sorting Out the Issues

There is now, as in the past, a debate over the Book of Mormon. It is ridiculed in the press and blasted by anti-Mormons. In a somewhat more sophisticated setting, we find

1 Robert M. Grant, with David Tracy, A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible, 2d ed, revised and enlarged (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 152.
3 Citations to Hutchinson’s “The Word of God is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-Century Scripture” will be parenthetical.
instances of writers who complain that those they denigrate as “Traditionalists,” that is, believing Latter-day Saints, simply will not compromise over the book. For instance, according to George D. Smith, what he calls a “New Mormon History” has striven “to understand Mormonism as part of American religious experience. Traditional Mormon historians, however, deny that the New Mormon History represents progress. They also typically reject compromises, such as the view that a mythical Book of Mormon can evince religious authenticity as ‘inspired redaction.’ Everything in the Book of Mormon, they say, must be accepted as historical fact.” Not everyone, of course, sees what they quaintly label “New Mormon History” as involved in an attack on the Book of Mormon.

Some cultural Mormon critics of the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon offer to give up charging Joseph Smith with fraud, if the “Traditionalists,” that is, the believing Latter-day Saints, will “meet them half-way.” Perhaps this middle

4 George D. Smith, “Editor’s Introduction,” Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), ix. Smith’s way of formulating his opinion leaves something to be desired. No one thinks that “everything” in the Book of Mormon is historical. One must make a distinction between what, for example, Lehi taught, which may or may not be “historical,” and there actually having been a Lehi who taught those things. The historical issue is whether there was a Lehi.

5 D. Michael Quinn, currently a former Mormon intellectual, makes nearly everyone, since 1950, who has written on the Mormon past into a “New Mormon Historian.” Obviously very few of these have written anything about the Book of Mormon or anything about a “New Mormon History.” See his “Editor’s Introduction,” to The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), ix. Quinn loves to refer to “traditionists” (p. xvii), “traditional Mormon History,” and is anxious to confess the “sins of traditional Mormon history” (p. xiv). He also identifies “Mormon apologists,” even “traditional Mormon apologists” (p. xii), who may be honest, but quickly become “dishonest apologists” (p. xiii) by ignoring or suppressing evidence. Of course, from Quinn’s perspective, it is only “Mormon apologists” who have that proclivity. Quinn defends those who employ naturalistic explanations of the Book of Mormon, for example, Jan Shipp’s, since such writers are included among those he labels New Mormon Historians. For additional comments on Quinn’s stance in his The New Mormon History, see Midgley, John Whitmer Historical Association Journal 13 (1993): 118–21.

6 Lawrence Foster, “A Radical Misstatement,” Dialogue 22/2 (Summer 1989): 6. Foster complains that his naturalistic explanation of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims is “simply not appealing to ‘true believer’ Mormon traditionalists. They are outraged when serious and sympathetic scholarship reaches any conclusion other than a full
ground between so-called “Traditionalists” and “New Mormon Historians” is what George D. Smith has in mind when he refers to “a mythical Book of Mormon.”

Some may ask: why not find a way to reduce the controversy over the Book of Mormon? What harm can such an accommodation do? The reasons for rejecting such compromises seem obvious to me. For one thing, the Book of Mormon is, more than anything else, what keeps the Church of Jesus Christ from becoming just another Protestant sect or social welfare agency. Its existence makes of Joseph Smith something other than a mere quaint or colorful example in a line of Christian primitivists or restorationists. In addition, the Book of Mormon was what witnessed to those who first became members of the fledgling Church of Christ that Joseph Smith wore the mantle of a genuine prophet, as it does to those who are currently believing and practicing Latter-day Saints. And its existence has, more than any other single thing, right from the beginning, distinguished the Latter-day Saints from various brands of Protestant sectarian religiosity.7

And yet the Book of Mormon is now, as it has been in the past, an embarrassment to cultural Mormons. It is, for one thing, controversial. When the Saints long for an accommodation with the secular and religious worlds and for respectability, it thwarts these desires because its very existence is a puzzle and an offense. The Book of Mormon challenges elements of modernity; it flies in the face of the dominant ideas in our cul-

and uncritical presentation of the received version of truth, whatever that may happen to be. (For example, consider Louis Midgley’s ridiculous assertion that there is ‘no middle ground’ in approaching Latter-day Saint history.) If any real engagement is to be possible between the so-called ‘traditionalists’ and the so-called ‘new Mormon historians,’ then the traditionalists will have to be willing to reach out when we attempt to meet them halfway, as we have done so frequently in the past with little or no response except vituperation against us on their part.” Ibid. Foster, of course, may or may not misconstrue my position, for I hold that there is no middle ground on the question of whether Joseph Smith was a genuine prophet, and on whether the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text and the word of God. These are either-or questions. On numerous other issues, of course, there are a wide variety of positions that may be taken. See Midgley, “Which Middle Ground?” Dialogue 22/1 (Summer 1989): 6–9.

7 The best treatment of this issue can be found in Richard L. Bushman’s magisterial Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 115–42, 187–88.
ture; it makes seemingly bold and even outrageous claims both prophetic and historical. Is there a way of rendering it harmless? Could it be made less scandalous if it were turned into a quaint example of rustic, nineteenth-century imaginative magic and myth? Or into the product of mysticism and superstition? Such an endeavor, which has been going on, as we will see, more or less behind the scenes for forty years, is what the current debate over writing Mormon history is really about. And this debate over how best to tell the story of the Latter-day Saints involves a struggle over what Allen Dale Roberts calls “the very definition of Mormonism, and who decides its nature.”

Where did this debate begin and how did we arrive at New Approaches to the Book of Mormon?

Surveying the Battlefield

In 1945, Fawn McKay Brodie published her No Man Knows My History,9 which was the first artfully fashioned naturalistic account of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims.10 The Saints correctly read her book as a betrayal of the faith by someone with roots in the Mormon community. When Brodie published her book, no one could respond to all of her charges.11 However, since then both Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon have received substantial treatments by Latter-day Saints challenging and supplanting her account. Still,

11 Hugh Nibley, in No Ma’am, That’s Not History: A Brief Review of Mrs. Brodie’s Reluctant Vindication of a Prophet She Seeks to Expose (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), attempted to leave open the possibility of a nonnaturalistic understanding of Joseph Smith, while buying time for others to become familiar with the archival sources necessary to respond to some of the details in Brodie’s account. For a brief description of the public and private quarrels surrounding the exchange between Brodie and Nibley, see Midgley, “Hugh Winder Nibley: Bibliography and Register,” in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 1:xix–xx.
since Brodie showed the way, it has become increasingly fashion­
able for those on the fringes of the Mormon community to proclai­m publicly their disbelief in the Book of Mormon. A strik­i ng example came in 1984, when Sterling M. McMurrin tri­umphantly confessed that he had come

to the conclusion at a very early age, earlier than I can remember, that you don’t get books from angels and translate them by miracles; it is just that simple. So I simply don’t believe the Book of Mormon to be authen­tic. I think that all the hassling over the authenticity of the Book of Mormon is just a waste of time. You should understand that I don’t mean to say that there aren’t some interesting and worthwhile things in the Book of Mor­mon. I don’t mean to attack the Book of Mormon but rather to simply deny its authenticity. I don’t believe that it is what the Church teaches it to be. 12

There is a pious streak in McMurrin, for he admits to finding “some interesting and worthwhile things in the Book of Mor­mon”—though not, of course, the word of God. The Book of Mormon, for McMurrin, is a human manufacture, and neither prophetic nor otherwise normative, since he rejects the possi­bility of divine special revelations as understood by faithful Latter­day Saints. What other conclusion could follow, given the dogma set forth in the passage quoted above? McMurrin’s dogma is to be expected, for how can there be revelations from God when no satisfactory rational demonstration of the reality and nature of deity has come within his range of experience and understanding? He routinely brushes aside revelation as vacuous emotional froth—sheer irrationalism. Hence, for the Saints to consider the Book of Mormon a genuine revelation from God is folly, from his secularized perspective.

Professor McMurrin is critical of the prominence given to the Book of Mormon in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism. 13 He opines that “the Encyclopedia is saturated with references to the

Book of Mormon, reflecting the recent Church movement to give the work greater attention. In his excellent Sunstone lecture, 'The Book of Mormon as Seen in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism,' which should be read by everyone interested in the nature of the Encyclopedia, George D. Smith has indicated that the Encyclopedia contains about 200 articles dealing with the Book of Mormon. In his treatment of this subject, Smith writes that 'editorial selectivity favoring orthodoxy prevails throughout the encyclopedia.' This is an odd statement. Was there no discernible bias at work in the selection of essays for inclusion in New Approaches? Are we to believe the dispatches from Signature Books claiming that one side in this war carry the colors of "critical historical method," while the other side is composed of odious "apologists"? Presumably it is proper for George Smith and his "Smith Research Associates" to publish anthologies, reprint books, and generate studies that approach the Book of Mormon with a negative bias.

Professor McMurrin resents the fact that "the Encyclopedia editors and authors assumed that their readers had no questions about" what he denigrates as "the literalistic orthodox interpretation of the Book of Mormon and the Bible. The authenticity of the Book of Mormon is taken for granted." McMurrin finds evidence in the Encyclopedia that Latter-day Saint scholars take seriously the possibility of "personal revelation which is now so

14 Ibid., 212. George D. Smith's paper has been published under the title "Orthodoxy and Encyclopedia," *Sunstone* 16/6 (November 1993): 48–53. Clearly there has been a certain selectivity at work in putting together New Approaches—which, if to do so served some purpose, could be called "unorthodox"—since the essays in this book either take it for granted or argue that the book is not an authentic ancient history. Instead, they turn it into fiction, inspired, inspiring or otherwise. Some of the authors whose work is included in this book accuse the defenders of the Book of Mormon of being apologists, while they defend a new heterodoxy.

15 George D. Smith is the "president of Smith Research Associates in San Francisco, [and] president of Signature Books." See the biographical note to his recent "William Clayton: In the Shadow of Power," *Journal of Mormon History* 19/2 (Fall 1993): 126. Smith Associates is a tax-exempt foundation which finances various projects. Metcalfe and Edward H. Ashment have, according to Metcalfe, received funding from Smith Associates to produce an attack on the book of Abraham. To this point Ashment has not produced that book. And Metcalfe assembled New Approaches to fulfill his obligation.

16 McMurrin, "Toward Intellectual Anarchy," 212.
prominent in the church.” The belief in revelation is, for him, “a belief that already accounts for much of the lunatic fringe in the church and could very well expand into an irrationalism quite uncharacteristic of Mormonism, which could produce a kind of intellectual anarchy in the church.” McMurrin seems unable to spit or swallow when it comes to the Restored Gospel; he rejects its grounds and much of its content, but simply cannot leave it alone. He has a fondness for elements of Mormon culture, but he objects to signs of genuine faith among the Saints. In this regard, he is the archetypal cultural Mormon.

Professor McMurrin is, of course, not alone in rejecting the Book of Mormon. Well before the founding of the Mormon History Association in December 1965, a few Latter-day Saint historians were uncomfortable with the Book of Mormon.

17 Ibid., 211.
18 Ibid.
19 See, for example, Marvin S. Hill, “The Historiography of Mormonism,” Church History 28/4 (December 1959): 418–19, and compare with his “The ‘New Mormon History’ Reassessed in the Light of Recent Books on Joseph Smith and Mormon Origins,” Dialogue 21/3 (Autumn 1988): 125. In the concluding remarks to this essay, Hill claims that “the issue between Mormons writing their history today and those who criticize them is not between those who believe and those who do not, but between those who think that old words and old interpretations are sacrosanct and that any changes may somehow destroy the faith, and those who contend that making concessions where evidence requires merely shifts the way we perceive things and not the substance of the things themselves.” Would Hill include, among the minor changes that he suggests might be necessary, the abandonment of belief that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text? Hill refers to the “strong faith” of readers of Dialogue, as shown in an opinion survey of subscribers. He notes that, “even among those who question the historicity of the Book of Mormon (27 percent of total subscribers) nearly half believe in its divine origin. Thus 77 percent would at least agree that its theology and moral teachings are authentically of divine origin.” Hill thus claims that the rejection of the claims made by the Book of Mormon about itself is of little or no consequence to the faith of Latter-day Saints, as long as those who do such a thing also claim to find something attractive in its teachings. What the poll showed is that 63 percent of the readers of Dialogue affirmed that they believe that the Book of Mormon “is an actual historical record of ancient inhabitants of the American continent, and was translated by the gift and power of God.” See Armand L. Mauss, John R. Tarjan, Martha D. Esplin, “The Unfettered Faithful: An Analysis of the Dialogue Subscribers Survey,” Dialogue 20/1 (Spring 1987): 47. The remainder were spread out along a continuum, holding various opinions including “don’t know,” or the Book of Mormon has “nothing necessarily to do with divine origin, inspiration, or God’s will, but it is an authentic literary product of nineteenth century America,” and so forth.
Some have been fascinated by naturalistic explanations similar to those offered by Brodie and have striven to fashion an identity by distancing themselves from details in her explanations. They thereby worked at constructing their own naturalistic position on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. But these authors were generally a shy and retiring lot—not bold and adventurous, not given to clarity and candor, and not equipped for sophisticated reflection on the consequences of their explanations for themselves or the Saints. Some of those who want to turn the Book of Mormon into fiction seem concerned to retain their identity as members of the Church, while others are indifferent about such matters. What seems to determine whether an author will want to see inspiration in a fictional Book of Mormon is when she desires some identity with the community of Saints or believes that historical matters are relevant to faith.

Klaus J. Hansen, in 1970, noted that the recovery of “the Joseph Smith Papyri may well represent the potentially most damaging case against Mormonism since its foundation.” Hansen and others assumed that the Joseph Smith papyri demonstrated that the book of Abraham was fraudulent. Hence, “one might well have expected a mass exodus of these people
from the Church. Yet none has occurred. Why? Because cultural Mormons, of course, do not believe in the historical authenticity of the Mormon scriptures in the first place. So there is nothing to disconfirm.”24 Hansen describes this as a “telling response . . . of the ‘liberals,’ or cultural Mormons.”25 In 1984, Hansen noted that writers seem unconcerned that “modern scholarship raises virtually insurmountable obstacles to the historicity of the Book of Mormon,” or are “undisturbed by the utter lack of scholarly correlation between the Joseph Smith Papyri and the book of Abraham. Significantly, those who are bothered by such discrepancies are . . . Mormons such as Fawn Brodie, Sterling McMurrin, and the author of this essay [that is, Hansen], who . . . believe that if the Book of Mormon wasn’t true, it must be a monumental fraud.”26 But, aside from a few of those Hansen calls “liberals or cultural Mormons,” most did not reveal their heresies. Instead, they operated, until recently, on a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.

It has been within the last decade that we have begun to see forthright denials by people with roots in Mormon culture that Joseph Smith made available authentic ancient texts. In 1983 at the Mormon History Association meetings in Omaha, Nebraska, Tony Hutchinson announced that Joseph Smith had not restored authentic ancient texts. That was the first time I can recall a Latter-day Saint scholar boldly advancing such an opinion.27

24 Ibid. Incidentally, Hansen borrowed the label cultural Mormon from my essay entitled “Secular Relevance of the Gospel,” Dialogue 4/4 (Winter 1969): 76–85, where I first described Cultural Mormonism. I had adapted it from the expression “cultural Protestantism,” which at times has been used to describe post-World War I European Protestant liberalism.

25 Hansen, “Reflections on the Lion of the Lord”; in this essay, Hansen also refers to “scholars who inaugurated the ‘new’ Mormon history.” Ibid., 111. The label “New Mormon History” was first used by Moses Rischin, a Jewish historian reviewing some essays in Mormon history in 1969. See Rischin, “The New Mormon History,” American West 6/2 (March 1969): 49. Hansen appears to have been the first Latter-day Saint to refer in print to a New Mormon History, and the second to refer to Cultural Mormons.


Hutchinson is now in the Signature spotlight with the argument that the Book of Mormon is fiction but still "inspired."

The deracinated who toy with such explanations will not likely remain in thrall to the notion that the Book of Mormon is fiction and yet, in some previously not understood way, "inspired" by God. They are more likely to claim that, since the Book of Mormon is fiction, Joseph Smith was involved in fraud, either knowingly or not, even though they may be willing to grant that some portions of the book are interesting. Hutchinson's move is also unstable in the sense that it is unlikely to function as a ground for or explanation of the faith of Latter-day Saints. In addition, those who are inclined to advance such an opinion must find ways of protecting their position from the bold stance taken by those who insist that Joseph Smith fabricated fiction, parts of which might be inspiring—which is quite a different notion than holding that God is the ultimate author of a fictional Book of Mormon.

That is not to say that a few secularized Latter-day Saints have not followed Brodie or McMurrin, but, until recently, they couched their accounts in ambiguous language by describing, for example, how Joseph Smith's opinions prior to 1830 on certain matters might be seen in language in the Book of Mormon, or how Joseph Smith could be sincere in telling stories about visits with angels because he lived before Sigmund Freud had explained how the mind works. Some have tried to make a distinction between what they label "sacred history," which they understand to be a myth grounding the community of believers, and real history, which involves real people, places and events. They then brush aside questions of whether what they consider the "Mormon myth" really happened. The impli-
cation of such arguments, when applied as explanations and not as excuses for avoiding facing up to difficult questions, is that Joseph Smith invented the Book of Mormon. Cautious cultural Mormon historians have avoided drawing undue attention to themselves. But we are now faced with a spate of forthright denials that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text in the pages of *Dialogue* and *Sunstone.*

These writers may, if it suits their fancy, retain some ties to the Church, but henceforth they insist that they will determine the content of Latter-day Saint faith. For example, one writer poignantly describes his “anti-conversion”—he insists that the Book of Mormon and book of Abraham are fiction and not fact. He concedes that “many questions remain” and that he has some questions that even he “can’t answer.” For instance, if “Joseph Smith is the author of the Book of Mormon, is he then a fraud, or is the Book of Mormon the result of revelatory experience?” He adds a comforting note: “At present, I have no compelling answer and am willing to entertain either possibility. Either way,” he acknowledges, “there are serious implications for my faith.”

It seems odd to me for someone talking about the ground and content of faith in God to be entertaining possibili-

that it [the Book of Mormon] may be something other than literal history. In fact,” according to Metcalfe, “toleration for nontraditional views of Mormon scripture and pluralistic expressions of faith are [sic] increasingly common. Leonard J. Arrington, former LDS Church Historian, has reflected, ‘I was never overly concerned with the question of the historicity of the First Vision or of the many reported epiphanies in Mormon, Christian, and Hebrew history. I am prepared to accept them as historical or as metaphorical, as symbolical or as precisely what happened. That they convey religious truth I have never had any doubt’ ” (p. x). This statement has been reprinted several times. See Arrington, “Why I Am a Believer,” *Sunstone* 10 (January 1985): 36–38; “Why I Am a Believer,” in Philip Barlow, ed, *A Thoughtful Faith: Essays on Belief by Mormon Scholars* (Centerville, UT: Canon, 1986), 225–33; and as “Epilogue: Myth, Symbol and Truth,” in Smith, ed., *Faithful History,* 303–10.


32 Ibid., 64.

33 Ibid.
ties that range from fraud to perhaps some weak notion of a "revelatory experience." So much for testimony!

This author ends with a homily about how "freedom to choose can be a frightening thing because it means that we are individually responsible for what we do." That is hardly a novel idea. But he then celebrates "a chastened belief which recognizes that certainty will always elude us, and that is a part of life. We choose to believe, but we cannot know for sure what the end of our faith will be." He claims that "the proper response to constant change is not to abandon religion altogether, but constantly redefine what faith means. This defining process necessarily leads to different results for everyone."35 This writer overlooks the fact that faith is at least partly a community possession, not merely a private good and not a whim—that faith is not something that one refashions to suit current fads and fashions.

To this point the most significant assaults on the historicity of the Book of Mormon have not been made by revisionist historians, and not by Evangelical Fundamentalist preachers, or in essays by isolated, disgruntled Latter-day Saints or former Latter-day Saints. The most imposing attack on the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon has been assembled by Brent Lee Metcalfe. Metcalfe has been a "Smith Associate," but is better known to Latter-day Saints for his involvement in the Mark Hofmann affair.36 His New Approaches is handsomely

35 Ibid. I like that revealing word "altogether."
manufactured, and more carefully edited than other, similar efforts by Signature Books, the press most responsible for promoting revisionist accounts of the Mormon past with attention to attacks on the Book of Mormon.

**Factions within the Revisionist Camp**

With the publication of *New Approaches*, Signature Books has again attacked the Book of Mormon. This collection of and more accurately, with Metcalfe's involvement in the Hofmann Affair. See *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 84, 93, 95–96, 101, 107–11, 115, 119, 121, 125–27, 129, 141, 309, 325, 425 n. 89. One item from Turley's book is worth contemplating: Turley reports that "Metcalfe lacked the graduate training in history that the others Shipps mentioned [Ronald W. Walker, Dean C. Jessee, and Marvin S. Hill] had, and 'without the apprenticeship that graduate training provides,' she said, 'his interpretations of the data in the historical record were generally very wide of the mark.' Shipps recalled that at the symposium [in which she announced to the public the existence of Hofmann's now infamous Salamander Letter, but, of course, without realizing that it was a forgery], 'Brent was clearly intoxicated ... with the idea that he possessed knowledge that would alter the world's understanding of the beginnings of Mormonism' " (Turley, p. 93).

But it still lacks indexes, which makes its use difficult, as does the citation of unpublished essays. The problem may be that the editors at Signature Books lack academic experience.

David P. Wright, 'In Plain Terms that We May Understand': Joseph Smith's Transformation of Hebrews in Alma 12–13," cites a sampling of anti-Book of Mormon literature or what he describes as "some studies in recent years [that] have been making it clearer that these works [Book of Mormon, book of Abraham] are not ancient but recent compositions set pseudonymously or pseudepigraphically in the past" (p. 165). As "studies" supporting this proposition, Wright cites Marvin S. Hill's doctoral dissertation (completed in 1968) and the revised version which was published as *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989); Robert N. Hullinger's *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992); non-Mormon Dan Vogel's *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986); his *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988); and also his anthology of more or less anti-Book of Mormon essays entitled *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990). In addition to these books, Wright also cites essays from *Sunstone* by George D. Smith (owner of Signature Books), Edward H. Ashment, Tony Hutchinson (with an essay which was also republished in Vogel's *Word of God*), and Mark Thomas.
essays is dedicated to showing that the Saints should abandon the claim that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient history and recognize that Joseph Smith was its author.

Tony Hutchinson, more than the other authors whose opinions appear in *New Approaches*, attempts to salvage something from the wreckage implied by this assault on the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. David P. Wright merely asserts that for him Joseph Smith “is as interesting and religiously relevant when understood to be the author of the Book of Mormon as when he is considered the translator” (p. 166). Such opinions, which are not entirely unlike the sentiments articulated in Professor McMurrin’s remarkable dogmatism about the Book of Mormon, are found here and there in *New Approaches*. But only a few of the authors whose essays are published in *New Approaches* seem to have any genuine appreciation for the teachings in the Book of Mormon.

This raises a question. Why would those like Hutchinson and Wright, who find the Book of Mormon at least interesting and somehow either “inspired” or inspiring when looked at as a strange example of imaginative fiction, want to be associated with the likes of Dan Vogel, Ed Ashment, Brent Metcalfe, and Stan Larson, whose approach is secular and betrays not the least sympathy for the teachings of the Book of Mormon? Hutchinson argues that the Book of Mormon has some relationship to God, even though it is strictly fiction. He claims that, for him, it is of religious significance. Why would Hutchinson want to appear in a book that sets out an attack on what he believes? Why did he not address the issues raised by those who, for the same or similar reasons, hold that the Book of Mormon is fiction and, hence, that Joseph Smith is a fraud? Hutchinson and Wright face the double task of (1) convincing faithful Latter-day Saints of the wisdom of turning the Book of Mormon into fiction, and (2) showing exactly why those who agree with them in holding that the Book of Mormon is fiction have gotten it wrong when they claim that Joseph Smith’s imaginative work is fraudulent.

What is less puzzling is why Metcalfe would want Hutchinson’s essay in his book. Hutchinson is not nearly as radical as Metcalfe, since he claims to believe that God is the ultimate author of the Book of Mormon even though he believes it to be fictional and filled with falsity. Hutchinson thus advances a position at odds with Metcalfe and his associates at Signature Books. But having Hutchinson in *New Approaches* is
useful; it helps provide a covering for the preferred position of the editor and publisher of the book. It is, so to speak, honey on the rim of the cup, whose bitter draft otherwise might be too much for even jaded Latter-day Saints. Here the politics of publishing for a Mormon audience provide the grounds for understanding what is going on. Metcalfe may have wanted Hutchinson’s essay in *New Approaches* to soften the impact of what otherwise would have been an even more blatantly anti-Book of Mormon book. And since both Metcalfe and Hutchinson reject the possibility that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text, they have a common enemy against whom they can fight, perhaps on the assumption that the enemy of an enemy is a friend.

Perhaps Metcalfe and those at Signature Books believed that they needed essays by the likes of Hutchinson and Wright to provide some semblance of legitimacy for their book. Be that as it may, it turns out that *New Approaches* is not accurately named. It might better have been titled *Two Competing Revisionist Approaches to the Book of Mormon*. Metcalfe should have confronted the question of the disparity between these two “approaches,” rather than quoting passages from authors, most of whom had little to say about the thrust of his book. In fact, most of the proof-texting provided by Metcalfe (pp. x–xi) to add authority and legitimacy to his book is irrelevant to its contents. He can be excused for botching such matters, since he has no academic experience or training—in fact, he has no training beyond his high school diploma. He is an autodidact. Unfortunately, it shows.

And yet the publication of *New Approaches* is an important event. It marks the most sophisticated attack on the truth of the Book of Mormon currently available either from standard sectarian or more secularized anti-Mormon sources, or from the fringes of Mormon culture and intellectual life. But attention to certain strands of thought being advanced by some of those who advertise themselves, especially to the press, as “Mormon intellectuals,” should have alerted Latter-day Saints that cultural Mormons were gearing up for a frontal attack on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. For more than a decade I have been warning of the direction being taken by a few—and I stress once again a few—Mormon historians bent on explaining Joseph Smith’s prophetic charisms and the Book of Mormon in essen-
tially secular, naturalistic terms. Most recently efforts to turn the Book of Mormon into fiction have been financed, promoted, and published by George D. Smith. And, for a cautionary tale, one ought to give attention to the subtle shift away from commitment to the Book of Mormon, including what appears to be the officially approved treatment of that text as “inspired” or inspiring fiction, which is one of the more crucial elements in the radical transformation of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

The artful dust cover for New Approaches reminds the potential reader that Book of Mormon authenticity was challenged in 1830. And it announces that this book continues “to examine this issue.” It would have been more accurate, though less politic, to have said that this book continues that tradition. The dust cover also claims that New Approaches will “discuss historicity” because “the Book of Mormon has become an icon that is revered more than understood, according to contributors.” Metcalfe insists that the Book of Mormon should be read in context. But what context? Ancient? Or modern? The answer is emphatically modern: “Returning to the nineteenth-century understanding of the text restores the book’s spiritual rather than symbolic importance.”

Reading the Book of Mormon as nineteenth-century fiction gives it only a symbolic meaning, while actually destroying its spiritual importance. Consider the following: Dan Vogel grants that “the Book of Mormon claims to be a divinely inspired


translation of an ancient record," but he believes that "there is a common ground on which Mormon and non-Mormon scholars can discuss the Book of Mormon in its nineteenth-century context without necessarily making conclusions about its historicity" (p. 21). But notice the question-begging assumption that the book's context really is the nineteenth-century. "The question of the Book of Mormon's historicity becomes secondary when the rhetorical critic seeks to understand the book's message to its first readers" (p. 21). Starting with Vogel's assumption, the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon becomes secondary in the sense that it no longer is a genuine alternative. But he is not interested in pushing that conclusion directly, and hence he claims that "those who accept the antiquity of the Book of Mormon should not object to this approach, since a translation is usually expressed in the language and cultural symbols of its intended audience" (p. 23). With this assertion in place, Vogel then claims that the intended audience of the Book of Mormon "is not an ancient readership" (p. 23), but a nineteenth-century audience, and he finds in the Book of Mormon "anti-Universalist rhetoric." And proof of this is the way it was read by anti-Mormons like Alexander Campbell and E. D. Howe. And support for this theory comes from those who, like Edward H. Ashment and James Lancaster, advance "the theory that Joseph Smith conceptually translated the Book of Mormon" (p. 23 n. 2). Vogel eventually raises the question "of whether ancient American cultures could have debated Universalism in a manner that would have been meaningful to those in early nineteenth-century America" (p. 47). Then he asserts that "it is doubtful that a study of ancient American cultures would produce a similar context for understanding this central theological focus of the Book of Mormon" (p. 48). His argument involves question-begging. Beginning with the assumption that the context for the Book of Mormon is the nineteenth-century, Vogel then interprets the text as a nineteenth-century document, and then concludes that it is just that and implies that it is nothing more. Mark D. Thomas works with similar assumptions (p. 53), and ends with similar conclusions. He adds a few wrinkles, such as the following: "I contend that for interpretive purposes it is more important to understand the book's audience than its author" (p. 53). By "contend," however, he does not mean "argue" but "assert." And he ends with the statement that "some readers may conclude that this points to a nineteenth-century
historical setting for the writing of the Book of Mormon” (p. 77)—which is exactly the point of his demonstration, if it has a point, is it not?42

Metcalfe neglects to explain how it is that by denying exactly what the book claims about itself and what Latter-day Saints have always believed to have been witnessed to them by the Holy Spirit, somehow “restores” its spiritual importance. How? And for whom? Be that as it may, this book, its editor tells its potential reader, “will modify, even transform, previous theories regarding the nature of Mormon scripture.” It will do that by providing a “wealth of fresh perspectives” and an “array of new directions.” On what constitutes scripture?

As I have shown, there are really two competing advances in New Approaches: one that is articulated most fully by Tony Hutchinson—that the Book of Mormon is imaginative fiction but still somehow “inspired” and not merely inspiring—and another, standing behind the essays by Metcalfe, Ashment, Vogel, Larson and perhaps others—that the Book of Mormon is fiction and hence of no genuine worth other than as something for them to wear out their lives attacking. But Metcalfe, in his “Preface,” obscures this ideological seam in his book, claiming instead that it merely contains “an array of new directions,” or “new perspectives” (p. xi). These are, he affirms, presented in the ten essays of his book “without primary reliance on technical jargon or apologetics.” Instead, according to Metcalfe, his book “attempts to expand appreciation of the Mormon scripture through critical analysis” (p. x). Oh, really? Believing that the single most important text in one’s life is fiction rather than fact actually expands one’s appreciation of that text? Metcalfe’s claim seems disingenuous, for it is difficult to identify passages in his book genuinely calculated to increase appreciation for the Book of Mormon.

Metcalfe’s “Preface” implies that he and those whose essays are included in New Approaches are masters of “critical methodology.” In addition, Metcalfe claims that “critical methodology” is “rigorous, balanced scrutiny” of sacred texts, which he claims yields “fresh intellectual and spiritual vistas . . . by viewing textual criticism, historical criticism, redaction criti-

42 For further comments on Thomas, see Midgley, “More Revisionist Legerdemain and the Book of Mormon,” 278–81. Among those who currently undertake that task, Thomas is one of the more inept at reading the Book of Mormon as nineteenth-century fiction.
cism, form criticism, structuralism and semiotics, narratology, economic- and gender-oriented readings, and application of sociology, anthropology, and archaeology" (p. ix). One will, however, look in vain in New Approaches for anything resembling most of these presumably crucial techniques. Metcalfe’s talk about “critical analysis” or “critical methodology” is mere window dressing.43

Sophic or Sophistic—The Signature Ideology?

The Saints have learned to live with, or more or less ignore, unseemly instances of what Alexis de Tocqueville once called the “business of religion.” But the products of such enterprises sometimes tell us much about what is going on along the fringes of Mormon culture. What Metcalfe has provided is grist for the anti-Mormon mill, as illustrated by the euphoria expressed by anti-Mormon zealots concerning New Approaches.44 In fact, it is difficult to figure out how, other than in detail and literacy, the stance taken by most of the authors whose essays are included in New Approaches differs from that taken by anti-Mormon preachers and publicists. Consider the following item from one of the more respectable anti-Mormons:

The Reverend Bill McKeever, who operates what he calls “Mormonism Research Ministry” out of El Cajon, California, grants that faithful Latter-day Saints believe the Book of Mormon to be an account of real people and places. There is simply no doubt about this matter. He is therefore delighted by the publication of Metcalfe’s New Approaches. He calls attention to this book as evidence that “there is a growing list of LDS scholars who have come to the conclusion that the book is not at all what their founder claimed it to be.”45 Reverend McKeever is happy to report that New Approaches contains essays arguing that the Book of Mormon is fiction. From his perspective, the publication of this book “is one more addition to the mounting

43 One of the more discouraging things in Metcalfe’s “Preface” is a footnote in which he cites thirty-two books published by Fortress Press as if they had some obvious relevance to what appears in the essays in his book (see p. ix n.2, and compare with his “bibliography,” pp. xii–xiv).

44 I doubt that Latter-day Saints will step forward with testimonials of deepened faith and understanding as new vistas are opened before their eyes by what they find in New Approaches.

evidence that the Book of Mormon is not of ancient origin.” Reverend McKeever acknowledges that “few would agree with all of the conclusions brought forth by *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, hopefully it will open the eyes of many sincere Latter-day Saints” who believe that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text.  

Reverend McKeever, speaking from an anti-Mormon perspective, finds *New Approaches* to be “strikingly similar to the polemics which Christians [read anti-Mormons] have been raising for years” against the Restored Gospel.  

How is *New Approaches* “strikingly similar” to the anti-Mormon position on the Book of Mormon? The answer is instructive, so here it is.

For one thing, Reverend McKeever insists that,

by undermining the claim for the Book of Mormon’s historicity, these writers [whose opinions are presented in *New Approaches*] reduce Joseph Smith to nothing more than a 19th century author of a fictional yarn. If there were no Nephites, there were no gold plates. If there were no gold plates, there was nothing for Smith to translate. Their evidence leaves the reader to conclude that Smith’s claims for the Book of Mormon are not at all based on hard evidence.

Reverend McKeever appears to delight in parading examples of writers with links to the Latter-day Saints, no matter how tenuous those links might be, and no matter what their qualifications or motives might be, who reject the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

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46 Ibid., 4.
47 Ibid., 3.
48 Ibid., 4.
49 Luke Wilson of the anti-Mormon Gospel Truths Ministry (aka Religious Research Institute) has been pleased to rely upon an unpublished but widely circulated paper by Ray T. Matheny (read at a Sunstone meeting in Salt Lake City, Utah, on August 25, 1984) to denounce the Book of Mormon. Professor Matheny now denies that the opinions presented in that paper represent his own. He claims that he was merely offering a criticism of the Book of Mormon that might be made by professional archaeologists unsympathetic to its claims. For the text of a letter by Matheny, 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): 189–91. Various anti-Mormon polemicians have also been delighted by D. Michael
But Reverend McKeever concludes that,

while the authors of New Approaches effectively question the historical aspects of the Book of Mormon, it is disheartening to hear some of them still defending Joseph Smith and the book he brought about. Especially depressing is Anthony Hutchinson’s conclusion about the Book of Mormon. Although he does not regard the Book of Mormon as a historical work, he still views it as a “work of scripture inspired by God.” (p. 1)

To Hutchinson, ‘God remains author of the Book of Mormon viewed as the word of God, but Joseph Smith, in his construct, would be the book’s inspired human author rather than its inspired translator’ (p. 2). “Admittedly, such a conclusion,” according to Reverend McKeever, “would be considered anathema to the great majority of Latter-day Saints. To conclude that the Book of Mormon is not an ancient record is to admit Joseph Smith was nothing less than a liar.”

Quinn’s *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987). As far as I have been able to determine, Quinn has made no effort to respond to such use of his book. One might also take note of the persistent reliance of Sandra and Jerald Tanner (through their Utah Lighthouse Ministry) on Quinn’s public ranting about his troubles with the Brethren. I read a paper at a session of the Western History Association meeting in San Antonio, Texas, on October 15, 1981. Quinn organized this session. In my paper, entitled “The Question of Faith and History,” but called by Quinn “A Critique of Mormon Historians,” I criticized two Latter-day Saint historians (Marvin S. Hill and Klaus J. Hansen) for offering naturalistic explanations of Joseph Smith’s prophetic charisms. Quinn resented my audacity, and on November 4, 1981 he responded by attacking me, Elder Ezra Taft Benson and Elder Boyd K. Packer. He circulated copies of his paper, as did the Tanners, who found it useful for their purposes. Quinn has now made it available in an expanded version under the title “On Being a Mormon Historian (and Its Aftermath),” in Smith, ed., *Faithful History*, 69–111. The Tanners are still euphoric about his bizarre remarks, if what they say in their *Salt Lake City Messenger*, for November 1993 (issue #85) is any indication.

50 McKeever, “Questioning Joseph Smith’s Role as Translator,” 4.

51 Ibid. Reverend McKeever also correctly notes that *New Approaches* “is peppered with criticisms against some of those researchers associated with F.A.R.M.S. (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies). Many LDS look to F.A.R.M.S. as the final word when it comes to ‘proving’ the Book of Mormon to be true (even though F.A.R.M.S. itself never makes such a claim).”
Finally, Reverend McKeever claims that *New Approaches* is available through the anti-Mormon Utah Lighthouse Ministry operated in Salt Lake City by Sandra and Jerald Tanner. And one must not forget the role played by Brent Metcalfe in formulating this weapon now in use by anti-Mormon publicists. In responding to the Reverend McKeever one is also thereby responding to Brent Metcalfe, for their programs, unfortunately, are the same as far as the Kingdom of God is concerned. But the focus of my review is not Metcalfe, who is hardly a significant figure in Mormon intellectual life. Instead, I will focus on the chapter written by Tony Hutchinson, a long-time friend of mine.

**The Metcalfe Miasma—the Magic of Methodology**

We have seen that *New Approaches* contains two different understandings of the Book of Mormon. In spite of this, the authors whose essays appear in Metcalfe’s book agree that the Book of Mormon is not an authentic ancient text. This agreement includes the following unbeliefs:

1. There was no real Lehi colony, that is, there were no genuine but only fictional Nephites, and (2), as a corollary, no ancient Nephite (neither Moroni nor Nephi) really visited Joseph Smith,
2. there were no plates and hence the witnesses did not see or touch anything (and those who thought that they saw

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52 McKeever, 4. The November 1993 issue (#85) of the bizarre periodic newsletter published by the Tanners, a thing called *Salt Lake City Messenger*, does not seem to offer *New Approaches* for sale. It does, however, offer a number of other books by Signature Books. These include George D. Smith, ed., *Faithful History*; **D. Michael Quinn, ed., The New Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991); Robert Hullinger, *Joseph Smith’s Response to Skepticism*; Rodger I. Anderson’s *Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Re-Examined* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991). The Tanners also offer Sterling McMurrin’s *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965). The reason the Tanners do not advertise Metcalfe’s *New Approaches* might be that the original printing has been temporarily exhausted.

53 I have clashed before with Hutchinson over his desire to deny that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text in “The Challenge of Historical Consciousness: Mormon History and the Encounter with Secular Modernity,” 543–45, 549–50; “The Acids of Modernity and the Crisis in Mormon Historiography,” 207–8; and in “More Revisionist Legerdemain and the Book of Mormon,” 289, 301–4.
plates were mistaken). (4) in dictating the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith provided nothing even faintly resembling a genuine translation into English of an ancient text, and (5) Joseph Smith was the author of the Book of Mormon. Put another way, the Book of Mormon is Joseph Smith’s fiction.

Tony Hutchinson insists on all of these propositions, though with qualifications not set forth in other essays in *New Approaches*. Unlike most of those whose work appears in Metcalfe’s book, Hutchinson wants to make God the ultimate source for the text of the Book of Mormon. He claims that God “inspired” Joseph Smith to produce a fictional Book of Mormon. But, as one might expect, Hutchinson is not clear about whether he believes that Joseph Smith knew that he was producing fiction that he passed off as a real history of real peoples, or whether he was dissociative, that is, in a state of mind—one must be delicate and avoid the word “mad”—such that he simply could not tell the difference between making it up and translating an ancient text. So there are two sides to Hutchinson: one is rock-hard critical and demands that the Saints face the fact that Joseph Smith made it all up either knowingly or unknowingly, and the other, the mushy, sentimental side, wants the Saints to believe that that is fine, because God “inspired” him to do that. Reverend McKeever enjoys the one side but will have nothing to do with the pious Hutchinson. And neither should the Saints. Why?

All of the authors whose essays appear in *New Approaches* seem to agree that the Book of Mormon is nineteenth-century fiction. Hutchinson is emphatic in the use of the word fiction. The others are more paraphrastic about the assumptions upon which they operate. In addition, the authors whose works Metcalfe has assembled insist that the Book of Mormon must be understood in its original context, which they dogmatically assume is nineteenth-century America, and not the ancient world.

But, as we have already noted, Metcalfe’s stable of authors disagree over whether turning the Book of Mormon into fiction damages the faith or rescues the faithful from religious pomposity, idolatry and confusion, as Hutchinson would have it. In either case, the faith is radically transformed. The alternatives as they present themselves in *New Approaches* include the following:
a. Some (Hutchinson, David P. Wright and perhaps Mark D. Thomas) find Joseph Smith interesting and they find religious value in the Book of Mormon even or especially when it is understood as fiction. For them it is “inspired” even if fictional.

b. The others, some overtly, others silently, disparage the Book of Mormon precisely because they hold that it is fiction, though they may grant that it might have language that some would find inspiring. That is a far different argument from that advanced by Hutchinson. It is, however, quite like the stance taken by McMurrin and even Brodie, for that matter.54

Nowhere in New Approaches does Metcalfe (or anyone else) confront the problems these two competing accounts of the Book of Mormon make for each other. Metcalfe does not indicate that his readers will find in his book a conflict between two factions, both of which view the Book of Mormon as fiction and yet seemingly reach different conclusions concerning its power and authority. Hence, he makes no effort to resolve the question of the effect the attack on the historicity of the Book of Mormon may or ought to have on the Saints or on people generally.

Metcalfe refers to the wonders of “critical methodology,” and how “fresh intellectual and spiritual vistas have been opened

54 There are at least two other approaches not taken into consideration in New Approaches. In addition to the possibility that we are confronted with an authentic ancient text that contains truths essential to salvation—the understanding common to Latter-day Saints from the beginning—there is the additional possibility that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text and yet its teachings are not true. The author who is closest to this position, Thomas G. Alexander, holds that the teachings found in the Book of Mormon, as well as those taught by Joseph Smith until about 1835, were either drawn from or similar to those found in orthodox nineteenth-century Protestant sources. See Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology,” Sunstone 5/4 (July–August 1980): 24–33, at 24. Alexander argues that, after 1835, Joseph Smith taught a theology radically inconsistent and discontinuous from that found in the Book of Mormon. And it is the later teachings, what he sees as the more liberal, optimistic teachings, that are true. He seems to hold that God taught real Nephites what amounts to nineteenth-century Protestant theology because they were primitives and could not comprehend the truth. After getting the attention of Joseph Smith with those teachings, God was able to effect a radical reconstruction of Mormon theology through Joseph Smith that culminated in the King Follett Discourse. Those fond of Alexander’s speculation about a radical reconstruction of Mormon theology after 1835 should realize that he believes in the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. He affirms that he would not remain a Latter-day Saint, if he did not believe that there really were Nephites.
up by viewing sacred literature from the vantage point of these methods" (p. ix). These methods include, as we have seen, "textual criticism, historical criticism, redaction criticism, form criticism, structuralism and semiotics, narratology, economic- and gender readings, and the application of sociology, anthropology, and archaeology" (p. ix). Charmed by Metcalfe’s promise of a great leap forward through the application of what he labels "critical methodology," readers will come away from New Approaches disappointed, and especially if they anticipate the opening up of new spiritual vistas.

The reader may get a hint of what Metcalfe has in mind when he asserts that "the application of literary- and historical-critical methods to the Book of Mormon allows for the possibility that it may be something other than literal history" (p. x). But does Metcalfe sense that the applications of critical methods to the Book of Mormon might also allow for the possibility that it could be an authentic ancient history? If not, and there is nothing in Metcalfe’s "Preface," or anything else he has published, that would suggest that he does, then he has involved himself in question-begging even as he embellishes his ideology with glossy labels in the hope of luring others into adopting his stance.

When Not Knowing Is the Best Kind of Knowing

It turns out that Hutchinson is the only author who confronts the question of the potential effect on the community of believers that would flow from accepting the opinion that the Book of Mormon is fiction. Rather than attempt to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon is fiction55 or show his readers how to make sense out of the Book of Mormon by reading it as fiction, he

55 I will not respond to Hutchinson’s comments on the scholarship of Hugh Nibley (pp. 8–10) and John L. Sorenson (pp. 10–11) other than to point out that he merely mocks Nibley with an anecdote, and he conjures a Straw Man out of what he innocently labels “the plain meaning” (see pp. 10–11 for this odd language) of the Book of Mormon, which he then brushes aside with ease as a way of countering Sorenson. The reader should also note that Hutchinson appeals to the flawed essay by Deanne G. Matheny in New Approaches to ground his confident claims about the dearth of archaeological evidences supporting the Book of Mormon. In the 1987 version of Hutchinson’s talk, he cited a paper by Ray T. Matheny, which its author now claims did not represent his true views. It is hard to believe that Hutchinson is well-informed in Mesoamerican archaeology.
basically offers an apology for his revisionist approach by claiming that good things would come to the Saints by giving up its claim to historicity (pp. 14–16).

1. According to Hutchinson, the Saints would begin to “walk by faith” rather than sight. This claim turns out to be an amorphous slogan, since in any case the Saints are dependent upon faith understood as trust in God, and that trust depends upon certain things actually having taken place. Hutchinson would have them jettison the belief that God made available through Joseph Smith some ancient texts and substitute his notion that God merely “inspired” Joseph Smith to fabricate fiction to work out some of his own theological quandaries. Hutchinson now grants, however, that even with his way of seeing scripture, the believer must conclude that Jesus was actually resurrected, or there is simply no ground for faith in any meaningful sense. But does this not also imply that the Saints must also believe in the incarnation of the preexistent Son of God, as well as the later unequivocal resurrection of Jesus? What Hutchinson wants excluded is the actual appearance of Jesus to Nephite disciples somewhere in America, and then later to Joseph Smith. Hence, the difference between Hutchinson’s amended “liberal Mormonism” and the faith of Latter-day Saints turns out to be one of degree and not of kind. And some of the arguments he uses to object to the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon can be used against his own fundamentals.

2. By understanding the Book of Mormon as fiction, the Saints would cease being idolatrous. Hutchinson gives the word “idolatry” a twist that allows him to accuse the Saints of being idolatrous for accepting the Restored Gospel.56

3. For Hutchinson, Latter-day Saints are currently involved in some dreaded fundamentalism presumably because they believe that there really was a Lehi. But he has his own fundamentals, which seem to include the resurrection of Jesus. He neglects to explain why his fundamentals are not vulnerable to the charge of being still another instance of noxious fundamentalism. And he neither defines nor describes fundamentalism as a

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56 Of course, idolatry confronts the Saints. But it manifests itself in the temptation to worship money, power, sex, reputation, some current fads in the culture, the urge to find an accommodation with gentile religiosity in the search for respectability and so forth. And taking away the authority of the Book of Mormon wipes away the single most powerful defense the Saints have against such chains.
religious posture in twentieth-century America nor does he provide his own explicit definition.

4. Hutchinson claims that Latter-day Saints are confronted with the evil of what he calls authoritarian Church government. If the reader is puzzled about the link between something called authoritarian church government and believing that there really was a Lehi, Hutchinson suggests that the one tends to foster the other. What this seems to suggest is that Hutchinson has a problem with the "authority" that he finds embedded in the Restored Gospel, and nothing more.

5. Finally, ceasing to believe that there were real Nephites will assist Latter-day Saints in avoiding absolute religious certainty. This claim loops back to the initial argument, that is, that the less convinced we are of the truth of the Restored Gospel, the better our spiritual condition, since we must "walk by faith" and so forth.

All this is presented as certain, not just as a possibility, by Hutchinson. But he also hints at the loss he experienced when he gave up believing that the Book of Mormon was an authentic ancient history. He started out a primitive believer. He served a mission for the Church without the benefit of his revisionist ideology. But somewhere along the line the bottom dropped out—he experienced the pain associated with coming to realize that he had believed something that is simply not true—and his relationship with the Saints has never been quite the same. How could it? But he also claims that his new understanding is somehow liberating.57

Where Hutchinson Gets It Right

Since it should be clear that I disagree with much of what I find in Hutchinson's essay, let me indicate some of the things that I admire in "The Word of God Is Enough." First of all, I admire Hutchinson's willingness to state openly what he believes; he is anything but shy and retiring. And he does not complain about being misunderstood. In addition, I appreciate

57 John Kunich, on the other hand, claims that "if our faith is strong, it will withstand hard evidence" (p. 265). Wright finds Joseph Smith "interesting and religiously relevant" (p. 166) or "religiously relevant and significant" (p. 211), even though he has abandoned the belief that Joseph Smith visited with a figure from the past who assisted him in gaining access to the history of ancient peoples.
his willingness to confront some of the arguments previously advanced against his opinion. Hutchinson is the first one who has actually responded with something other than insults to my arguments in behalf of the Book of Mormon.58

And there are a number of statements in Hutchinson’s “The Word of God Is Enough,” including the title, with which I am in agreement. These include the following:

1. I agree with some of Hutchinson’s historical observations. For instance, he is right in asserting that the “early Latter-day Saints were brought together as a people by the publication of the Book of Mormon” (p. 3). And they are currently kept together by that book, which is for them normative both in what it teaches and as a symbol forming and framing the community of faith and memory.

2. Hence I agree with Hutchinson’s claim that “belief in the Book of Mormon and Bible as the word of God has been an essential element of LDS faith from its beginning” (p. 3).

3. I also agree with Hutchinson’s claim that “to abandon a confession in either book’s scriptural status would constitute a profound disjunction or break in the continuity of LDS faith tradition” (p. 3).

4. It is also right for him to admit that “to abandon such a confession of God’s role in bringing forth the book would be to remove oneself from that separate identity” (p. 4).

5. And hence I also agree that “to the degree that we disparage the holiness and value of the Book of Mormon, we alienate ourselves from the LDS tradition and define ourselves as outside of that tradition” (p. 4).

58 Ashment, like Metcalfe, has a difficult time dealing with criticisms. About the best that Ashment can do is complain that those who reject his revisionist stance are “apologists,” or have an “apologetic agendum” that somehow makes it impossible for them to deal with evidences or arguments. For instances of this abuse of language, since everyone is an apologist for—that is, a defender of—some position, see Ashment’s remarks in his The Use of Egyptian Magical Papyri to Authenticate the Book of Abraham: A Critical Review (Salt Lake City: privately printed by Resource Communications for the author, 1993), 19–20, 22; his “Historiography of the Canon,” in Faithful History, 286 (where he turns me into an “objectivist apologist”), 290–95; and his curious remarks about “apologists” in his contribution to New Approaches (pp. 331, 374–75).
The Scripture-Fiction Conundrum

Hutchinson’s essay was originally a paper read under the title “The Word of God Is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-Century Fiction” at the 1987 Washington Sunstone Symposium (15–16 May 1987). The word “scripture” has now been substituted for the word “fiction” in the version of this talk published in New Approaches. In his original remarks he insisted that the Book of Mormon is “nineteenth-century fiction” but that it can still somehow be considered “inspired” and hence can continue to constitute “scripture” for Latter-day Saints. The link between “fiction” and “scripture” is retained in the published version of his talk.

Hutchinson began his comments with the following assertions: The Saints must “confess in faith that the Book of Mormon is the word of God,” but also “abandon claims that it is a [sic] historical record” (p. 1); it is “a work of scripture inspired by God,” but “one that has as its human author, Joseph Smith, Jr.” (p. 1). The consequences of accepting these propositions, according to Hutchinson, would be as follows: “The Book of Mormon would not be a sign of the uniqueness of Mormonism and warrant of its authority and truthfulness” (p. 1). Joseph Smith, in his scenario, “remains a prophet called by God to be an instrument in founding a uniquely vital form of Christianity which in crucial ways restores the experience of God enjoyed by the earliest Christians” (p. 2), but nothing authentically ancient was restored. Joseph Smith is thus seen by Hutchinson as the “inspired human author” of the Book of Mormon (p. 2). But then something has to give and we are next told that “inspiration” needs a retooling in “usage and understanding” (p. 2). Such a retooling is necessary to avoid idolatry—the idolatry presumably found in understanding the Book of Mormon as a sign of God’s having opened the heavens once again.

After setting out these and other related opinions, Hutchinson concludes by claiming that “if there is anything in what I am saying it is the notion that ultimately whether the Book of Mormon is ancient really does not matter. The threat of idolatry I mention only exists when one consciously decides that antiquity does matter” (p. 16). Hutchinson has made a conscious decision that the Book of Mormon is not an authentic ancient text. What matters for Hutchinson is attacking what the book itself claims, what Joseph Smith taught, and what the faithful
Saints have always taken as a given. And what really matters is finding a way of transforming the Church into something much more along the lines of an imaginary liberal Protestant community.

For Hutchinson, Joseph Smith’s flawed notions about folk magic, anthropology, and other such matters “inform the book’s very self-conception and presentation,” even though they are “not found in the book” (p. 5). Why then, if these charges are true, should the Saints accept the Book of Mormon as scripture? Hutchinson accepts the secular notion that scripture merely provides a myth for the faithful.

“I shall . . . go on to explain some of the reasons I think we should view it as nineteenth-century [fiction] rather than [as an] ancient scripture [book]” (p. 2 with insertions in brackets of language from the 1987 version). These reasons [for thinking of it as nineteenth-century fiction] shall be grouped under two headings: (1) considerations of reasonableness, evidence, and methodology; (2) considerations of religion and theology” (p. 3, again with language from the 1987 version inserted within brackets). Hutchinson now claims to “agree with the current LDS orthodox approaches to the book” (p. 4). In 1987 this sentence read as follows: “On this point I am in absolute agreement with current LDS orthodox approaches to the Book of Mormon and its critics. I differ with these [orthodox approaches], however, in two major areas: one, whereas they believe viewing the book as nineteenth-century fiction disparages it, I do not” (p. 2). And immediately after a quotation from Joseph Smith taken from the Far West Record, in 1987 Hutchinson included the following: “Now why should we view it as nineteenth-century fiction?” This was removed in the 1993 redaction. “Of course if your conception of scripture expands so as to allow error and even fiction, you can accept its religious value while keeping rational about its claims” (p. 11 and in the 1987 version, p. 4). Hutchinson also opines that “understanding the Book of Mormon as a fictional work of nineteenth-century scripture has real advantages” (p. 17).

We can see that in the 1993 version of Hutchinson’s talk the word “scripture” has been substituted for the word “fiction” in most but not all instances. The following is an exhaustive list of such changes:

1. In the title (p. 1; 1987 version p. 1).
2. "I think we should view it as nineteenth-century [fiction] rather than an ancient [book] scripture" (p. 2; 1987 version, p. 1 where the word "scripture" takes the place of the word "book").

3. "These reasons [for thinking of it as nineteenth-century fiction] shall be grouped under two headings" (pp. 2–3; 1987 version, p. 1).

4. "I differ with these [orthodox approaches], however, in two major areas: one, whereas they believe viewing the book as nineteenth-century fiction disparages it, I do not" (p. 2; 1987 version, p. 2).

5. "Now, why should we view it as nineteenth-century fiction?" (p. 8; 1987 version, p. 2).

6. "Of course if your conception of scripture expands so as to allow error and even fiction, you can accept its religious value while keeping rational about its claims" (pp. 10–11; 1987 version, p. 4).

7. "Understanding the Book of Mormon as a fictional work of nineteenth-century scripture has real advantages" (p. 17; 1987 redaction, p. 9).

With Retooling One Can Be Fashionably "Liberal"

If the Book of Mormon is understood as fiction (that is, "inspired by God in the same way that the Bible is inspired" [1]), what changes does Hutchinson think would have to be made in Latter-day Saint understanding? According to Hutchinson, "our overall approach should not be substantially changed by abandoning insistence on the book’s ancient origin" (p. 1). But some things would change. For example, "our general use of the book as an apologetic argument or a sign of the uniqueness of Mormonism and warrant of its authority and usefulness" (p. 1) would be changed.

Presumably it is not a substantial change to cease believing that the Book of Mormon is an authentic account of a real Lehi colony after having that belief constitute a key element of the faith of Latter-day Saints since 1830. Such a change would be a minor readjustment, according to Hutchinson. Why? He does not say. He merely moves on to "another change."

The Book of Mormon, given Hutchinson’s stance, could not be cited as evidence that Joseph Smith was God’s prophet, nor could it be cited as evidence that God actually restored anything. Hutchinson does, however, continue to talk about the Book of
Hutchinson, *The Word of God Is Enough* (Midgley) 231

Mormon, when understood as fiction, being “reliable in conveying the truth of the restored gospel when read and used in faith and repentance” (p. 1).

Since the Book of Mormon “would be seen as literary and theological products of nineteenth-century America” (pp. 1–2), Latter-day Saints would, upon adopting the stance advocated by Hutchinson, change the way they “tend to approach detailed interpretation of the book’s text and meanings” (p. 1). They would be forced to see the Book of Mormon as containing “an account of the origins of the American Indians and their relation to ancient biblical stories as conceived by its nineteenth-century author, Joseph Smith” (p. 1).

Perhaps we should ask what would not be changed, if the Church were to adopt Hutchinson’s proposal? “God remains the author of the Book of Mormon when viewed as the word of God” (p. 2). Joseph Smith “remains a prophet called by God to be an instrument in founding a uniquely vital form of Christianity which in crucial ways restores the experience of God enjoyed by the earliest Christians” (p. 2).

In Hutchinson’s view, Joseph Smith was not a translator of ancient texts, and, hence, the Book of Mormon is not a restoration of something genuinely ancient. Nor is Joseph Smith a prophet in the way he and his followers have previously understood. In order for Hutchinson’s theory to work, he must radically alter the understanding of revelation contained in the Book of Mormon and implicit in the story told by Joseph Smith. He will allow Joseph Smith to be a “prophet” if and only if we allow him to tell us what constitutes prophecy.

Hence he admits that “there are compelling reasons for undertaking a retooling of LDS usage and understanding of such terms as translation and inspiration” (p. 2). Without fundamental changes in the Latter-day Saint understanding of what constitutes a prophet (and divine revelation), Hutchinson’s theory is incoherent. But with the necessary changes, it becomes radically inconsistent with what has gone before. Hence he refers to the “weaknesses in the current LDS understanding of the Book of Mormon” (p. 2), the identification of which rests on his private credo—on what he believes. And it turns out that what he believes runs directly counter to what is contained in the Book of Mormon. Hence the following: “I believe that the word of God or the gospel of Jesus Christ is ill-served if not undermined” by focusing on the Book of Mormon’s “claims about itself and its
value as a sign authenticating LDS religious life” (p. 2). Presumably the gospel, as Hutchinson understands it, would be better served by understanding the Book of Mormon “as a nineteenth-century reworking of the biblical tradition” (p. 2), that is, as fiction.

Hutchinson addresses “briefly the question of why Latter-day Saints should accept the book as scripture and whether it is possible to hold such a belief without accepting the book’s claim to [be an authentic] ancient history” (p. 2). He then provides what he calls “personal theological reflections on why we [LDS] like to use the Book of Mormon as a sign rather than normative scripture” (p. 3), as if those were mutually exclusive alternatives. This is an argument borrowed from an essay by A. Bruce Lindgren, currently World Secretary to the RLDS First Presidency. What Hutchinson seems to assume is that the Book of Mormon must be seen as either a sign that God has acted to restore the gospel by providing us with a knowledge of his dealings with the Lehi colony or “as normative scripture” (p. 3). But can it be the one without being the other? The Book of Mormon functions in the life of believers as both a sign that God has acted to restore his gospel, and as the content of that restoration; it is both a sign and a norm. In fact, it cannot genuinely serve as either without serving as both. One can see that by asking the question: “Why would one submit to the authority of the Book of Mormon when it was believed to be merely nineteenth-century fiction?” Hutchinson has, in fact, got the question figured out: “Why should Latter-day Saints accept the Book of Mormon as the word of God?” (p. 3). And to his credit he attempts to answer this question, but in an odd way. Instead of attempting to show that the book is true, Hutchinson tells a story. He reports that “early Latter-day Saints were brought together as a people by publication of the Book of Mormon” (p. 3). This is perfectly obvious. But it is only part of the story. It was not merely the act of publication that constituted a believing community of Saints, but their actually believing that the book was what it claimed to be. Hutchinson is now in the business of telling us that those so gathered were mistaken in their belief, for the book was not what it claimed to be, but was

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Joseph Smith’s fiction in which he attempted to orient himself and others to the world by reworking the biblical stories.

Hutchinson then speaks of a “strident primitivist commitment” that only David Whitmer retained (p. 3). “In Whitmer’s account [in 1887, by the way], belief in the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith was secondary and peripheral” (p. 3) to the Book of Mormon. From a paraphrase of Whitmer’s 1887 account, written long after he had severed his relations with Joseph Smith and the Restored Gospel, Hutchinson draws the conclusion that “Smith’s preeminence in the early LDS community stemmed from his role in bringing forth the Book of Mormon rather than his claim to prophetic gifts. It was the Book of Mormon which drew seekers together” (p. 3). If we grant that Hutchinson might be correct on this point, we must ask how that would justify our not accepting the Book of Mormon as an authentic ancient history, but treating it as nineteenth-century fiction. Hutchinson actually reaches the conclusion that “belief in the Book of Mormon and Bible as the word of God has been an essential element of the LDS faith from the beginning. To abandon a confession of either book’s scriptural status would constitute a profound disjunction or break in the continuity of LDS faith tradition” (p. 3). Of course, Hutchinson is on the right track when he makes this assertion. What he must show is that, by treating the Book of Mormon as fiction, he has not made a radical break with tradition, but merely a minor readjustment to avoid dreaded evils such as “fundamentalism” and “idolatry.”

We can leave out reference to Whitmer’s 1887 account, and we can also drop from Hutchinson’s argument any reference to abandoning belief that the Bible is the word of God. These are not the issues Hutchinson was presumably addressing. That does not mean that he should not have addressed those who have such a desire. But to have done so would have put him in opposition to the agenda being promoted and financed by George D. Smith, and it could very well have made his essay unacceptable to Brent Lee Metcalfe. Clearly Hutchinson has his guns aimed at believing Latter-day Saints and not at those like Metcalfe, Ashment and Vogel and others on the fringes of the Mormon community who have simply abandoned belief.

To this point what Hutchinson’s argument amounts to, when the irrelevant elements are removed, are the following propositions:
1. Early Latter-day Saints were brought together by the Book of Mormon.

2. Confidence in and dependence upon the Book of Mormon was at the beginning and still is and must remain an essential element of the faith of Latter-day Saints.

Therefore, according to Hutchinson, an outright abandonment or even lessening of the Book of Mormon as a normative text by Latter-day Saints would constitute what he calls "a radical disjunction or break in the continuity of LDS faith tradition" (p. 3), and tragic consequences for the community would necessarily follow.

Why then struggle to turn the Book of Mormon into fiction? What Hutchinson argues is that the Book of Mormon, when seen as Joseph Smith's fiction, can still be thought of as normative. What he wants to guard against is the clear recognition by his readers that he is proposing just such a radical break with the traditional faith of Latter-day Saints. We can see just how radical the break proposed by Hutchinson is by asking some questions:

1. Have the Saints ever thought that the Book of Mormon was Joseph Smith's fiction?

2. Have the Saints ever considered an understanding of the Book of Mormon as fiction, as a reason for considering it the word of God?

Hutchinson's effort to answer the question of why the Saints ought to accept the Book of Mormon as the word of God inadvertently makes a case for not treating it as fiction, since it has (a) never been understood that way, and (b) it is crucial for the Latter-day Saint community that it be received as the word of God. Hence, his convoluted answer to why Latter-day Saints should accept the Book of Mormon as the word of God moves to a hypothetical "if we confess that LDS people were somehow brought together and preserved by God, then it follows that God's hand was at work in bringing forth the book which gave this group of Christians their separate existence. To abandon such a confession of God's role in bringing forth the book would be to remove oneself from that separate community" (p. 4). That seems to be exactly what Vogel has done officially, and Metcalfe, Larson, Ashment, and perhaps others whose essays appear in New Approaches have done unofficially.
What Makes the Book of Mormon Normative?

Hutchinson also notes that merely believing that God had a hand in bringing forth the Book of Mormon would not make it normative for an individual or for the community of Saints. But holding that God had a hand in bringing it forth, something not accepted by a number of authors whose essays appear in *New Approaches*, is a necessary precondition for having the book actually serve as a norm for the Saints.60 Hutchinson is correct when he asserts that “to the degree that we disparage the holiness and value of the Book of Mormon, we alienate ourselves from the LDS tradition and define ourselves as outside that tradition” (p. 4).

The real question, as Hutchinson more or less senses, is the following: “Can the Book of Mormon hold value as scripture if it is not an ancient book?” (p. 4). Does one not disparage the Book of Mormon if one rejects its claims about itself—that is, that it is an authentic ancient text? At this point in his essay, he objects to my earlier arguments against his effort to turn the Book of Mormon into fiction, while attempting to retain something of its function as a norm for the believer. Hutchinson claims that my argument misses the point about what constitutes scripture “and how it relates to faith” (p. 4). But instead of confronting my argument, he wants to defend the rather odd notion that a text could make false claims about itself, that is, be incorrect “in all its major claims,” and still be considered scripture (by which he presumably means the word of God) and also be normative for the community of Saints. He thus baldly denies that the message of the Book of Mormon is “made irrelevant or less than a part of the normative canon of scripture when the book is understood as fiction” (p. 5).61

For Hutchinson, scripture “transcends issues of mere historical curiosity” (p. 5). In one sense this is obviously true. When believers encounter the story of Jesus of Nazareth and his teachings, sufferings, death and resurrection, their interest in the text moves beyond mere historical curiosity. But that does not

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60 By “norm” I mean a “canon” (or measuring rod) for the faith of the Saints.
61 When the Book of Mormon is read as nineteenth-century fiction, “the message remains of a God involved in history” and so forth (p. 5). This leaves open the possibility that any work of fiction that happens to have something about God being involved in history has a claim to being “scripture.”
mean that they no longer care whether there was a Jesus or whether he was resurrected. It is precisely their concern about the reality of such matters that takes them past mere historical curiosity about some ancient Palestinian peasant.

Myth and Scripture—the Fatal Embrace

In the case of the Book of Mormon and the account of its coming forth, efforts to turn it and the story linked to it into a myth, understood as fiction, “inspired” or otherwise, radically undercut its authority. I have made this argument a number of times and in two instances in direct response to an earlier version of Hutchinson’s essay. He has chosen to respond to that portion of my criticism of his ideology. Hence, he now objects to my earlier arguments against his efforts to read the Book of Mormon as “inspired” fiction on the assumption that adding the word “inspired” will somehow retain a faint role for that text as the word of God. He denies that the message of the Book of Mormon is “made irrelevant or less than a part of the normative canon of scripture when the book is understood as” fiction (p. 5).

Scripture, Hutchinson claims, “transcends issues of mere historical curiosity” (p. 5). Hence it simply does not matter that scripture is fictional and in that sense merely mythological. Why is that so? Because scripture, according to Hutchinson, is myth. What else could it be? And Hutchinson has a theory about the relationship between what he calls “myth and its historical claims” (p. 5), since the sacred texts make genuinely historical and not merely mythic claims. Hutchinson argues that these historical claims are, with one exception, entirely irrelevant and also simply not true. Myth, according to Hutchinson, “means faith or religious belief, even theology, cast in story or narrative form rather than simply listed propositions” (p. 5). There is a corollary: the truth and hence authority of a narrative only depends upon historical reality when “this historical reality is somehow directly related to the reality the myth seeks to mediate” (p. 5). What exactly constitutes being “somehow directly related”? Hutchinson will grant that the truth of the message of the New Testament depends upon whether Jesus was killed and then later as a resurrected being reappeared to his disciples.

Hutchinson then refers to his own “acceptance of the Book of Mormon as scripture” (p. 5), even though he flatly rejects
even the possibility that it is an authentic ancient text. And he brushes aside as foolishness and idolatry the traditional understanding of the Saints that the Book of Mormon message is simply true. Instead, he thinks that the Book of Mormon is simply incorrect "in all its major claims" about itself (p. 5), but it still is normative for the community of Saints. Is this believable?

Why the Fuss?

There are several possible ways of understanding the Book of Mormon, including the following:

1. The Book of Mormon is true history and the word of God. This, of course, is the traditional belief of Latter-day Saints.

2. The Book of Mormon is true history but not the word of God. With one minor exception, no one has advanced this theory.

3. The Book of Mormon is false history, that is, it is not really a history at all, but is, instead, fiction, myth, a nineteenth-century imitation or reworking of the Bible. But it is still the word of God for those who understand the word of God to be essentially mythological and who want to retain their ties to the Mormon community. Hutchinson and Wright provide the best examples.

4. The Book of Mormon is not an authentic ancient text and also therefore not the word of God. Examples can be found in the writings of Vogel, Ashment, Larson, Metcalfe and McMurrin. This is also the Evangelical Fundamentalist line on the Book of Mormon.

5. The Book of Mormon is a true history but its teachings were expanded and hence radically modified by Joseph Smith in an effort to accommodate them to its immediate nineteenth-century audience.62

62 Blake T. Ostler is best known for what he calls an expansion theory of the Book of Mormon. He argues that the book is an authentic ancient history but that Joseph Smith expanded the teachings of real Nephites in an effort to address contemporary theological issues being debated in the nineteenth-century. See Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source," Dialogue 20/1 (Spring 1987): 66–123. Ostler is taken to task in New Approaches by Hutchinson (pp. 11–12), Vogel (p. 48), and David P. Wright (p. 207 n. 89), although Melodie Moench Charles (p. 94) cites Ostler with approval.
Hutchinson’s position is that there are what he calls “religious and theological reasons” for not reading the Book of Mormon as history and hence for rejecting it as an authentic ancient text. He argues that to believe that the Book of Mormon is an authentic history of real peoples “tends to support absolute religious certainty when it comes to revealed religion” (p. 14). The silent premise behind this assertion is that, when confronting what claims to be a divine revelation, we must remain in a perpetual state of uncertainty. Then Hutchinson insists that “such beliefs also tend to support the authority of those who claim a similar status” (p. 14). In addition, accepting the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon “fosters a sense of sectarian advantage” (p. 15). And he also opines that the Book of Mormon “presents revelation as clear, uncertain, and unmixed.” This is clearly contrary to his understanding of “religion.” And, finally, when the Book of Mormon is read as an authentic ancient text, “it draws a specific picture of the resurrected Jesus,” and hence presumably disparages “conflicting images of Jesus” (p. 15). All of these, according to Hutchinson, work “against basic Christian values of humility, walking by faith and not by sight, and brotherly kindness” (p. 15). And accepting such views “tends to support generally fundamentalist approaches to scripture” (p. 15). Though Hutchinson does not explain what is commonly meant by or even what he means by “fundamentalist,” a twentieth-century Protestant label, whatever it is turns out to be very bad since “Fundamentalism is legalistic” and “Jesus despised legalism” (p. 15). But how can we be certain, since that opinion is one of many conflicting pictures of Jesus? And he presumably is annoyed when a picture of Jesus is privileged.

Hutchinson claims that “all of these basic religious effects of supporting Book of Mormon antiquity are contrary to the gospel” (p. 15). But, of course, his notion of what constitutes the gospel is determined by a liberal sectarian religious ideology that rests on sources other than the Book of Mormon and in conflict with the Restored Gospel. Hutchinson knows that there are problems with this bald assertion, for he has to qualify his claims. Why? To push the unqualified assertion would be to hold that Latter-day Saints are “anti-gospel per se” (p. 15), and such a stance is not likely to have much appeal even with cultural Mormons, though it would be attractive to anti-Mormons.
So Hutchinson shifts his grounds and comes up with the notion that it is only scholars who continue to support the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon who are involved in idolatry and are opposing the gospel as he understands such things. Then he gives an account of idolatry in which idols are “allowed or even encouraged” by God at certain times “to help people focus their thoughts on something beyond” (p. 15). So it was that Joseph Smith and the Saints were permitted to worship with and through idols like the Book of Mormon. That was not the bad kind of idolatry. The bad kind comes onto the stage only when scholars take seriously the possibility that there really was a Lehi colony and that the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth actually visited a remnant of Lehi’s descendants. These unnamed scholars are antigospel and guilty of idolatry because they continue to believe what has always been believed by faithful Latter-day Saints. Instead, they should accept some of the current theological speculations of some liberal Protestant (and Catholic) theologians and biblical scholars who want to deliteralize the historical elements in the Bible by providing essentially naturalistic accounts of what otherwise appear to be genuine prophetic charisms. Then would they be in a position to avoid the bad idolatry.

Idolatry has come “to mean setting up a symbol of the image in the place of God which it represented” (p. 15). Hence “it is in this sense that persistent and evidence-despising stubborn support of Book of Mormon antiquity can be idolatrous” (p. 15). “An image of God, an image of Jesus, is set up in the stead of Jesus” (p. 16). Of course, in one sense this is true. But how could it be otherwise? We depend upon texts that open a window to the divine. If those texts are mythological in the sense of being fictional, it is difficult to see how they can point beyond themselves to reality. Instead, they become at best mere emblems of sentimental moralism. But Hutchinson does not seem to be really interested in sorting these things out. What he is interested in doing is conducting a war against those determined to read the Book of Mormon as an authentic ancient text that opens a window on reality. “The Book of Mormon,” accordingly, “becomes a stumbling block, a real barrier in our spiritual paths” (p. 16) when we see in it reality, rather than merely a kind of chartering myth.

Hutchinson holds that what he calls “faith stories or myths” play upon the minds of children (p. 16), and there is nothing
wrong with that. But they should be seen by adults as fictional, according to Hutchinson. Stories for children or child-like adults help them cope with the world, according to Bruno Bettelheim, and Hutchinson appropriates that commonplace as his explanation for the Latter-day Saint way of reading the Book of Mormon. So, for him, the question now confronting Mormon scholars, if not the leaders and members of the Church, is how to find a way to gracefully shift doctrinal gears regarding the Book of Mormon. "I am not calling for the church to come out next year with a confession that they were wrong on the Book of Mormon, that Smith got it wrong, and that we all need to become enlightened, post-critical Latter-day Saints" (p. 16). But exactly why not? Because Hutchinson does not think such an announcement is forthcoming? Or because he senses that it would have detrimental consequences for the life of the Saints? But Hutchinson is clearly advocating that properly enlightened Mormon intellectuals begin to advance his revisionist agenda.

Plausibility

"Can the Book of Mormon hold value as scripture if it is not an ancient book?" (p. 4). Hutchinson insists that the Book of Mormon was "written by an inspired prophet of the nineteenth century" (p. 5). But for his theory to appear plausible, he has to shift to other matters. Hence he speaks of "the general question of how scripture in its *gestalt* transcends issues of mere historical curiosity" (p. 5). And then he begins to talk, as we have seen, of "scripture as myth" (p. 5). And he assures his readers that he does not mean by "myth" a false story or superstition. Instead, he has in mind something like faith cast in story form. But he also admits that "the religious power of myth [when understood as faith cast in story form] in scriptural narrative *in some ways* depends on the historical reality of the events or persons it describes—but only when this historical reality is somehow directly related to the reality the myth seeks to mediate" (p. 5). "The power of a myth about redemption through Christ crucified and resurrected . . . seems to me directly dependent on whether Jesus in fact died and then bodily reappeared to his disciples." To me it also depends upon whether Jesus actually visited Joseph Smith.

Earlier I attempted to extend Hutchinson's somewhat reluctant acceptance of the necessity of believing that Jesus was res-
unrected to include belief that Joseph Smith actually visited with an angel or there really being a Lehi colony. Hutchinson declines to respond to my argument. Instead, he claims to believe in angels, though not ones with names like Moroni or Nephi. And he claims that I have not taken seriously the intensity of his acceptance of the "Mormon myth." And he then boasts of his "desire to have a genuine religious experience within the LDS community" (p. 6). And finally he grants that he can appeal "only to personal experience" (p. 6) to justify his stance. "I happen to believe in angels and believe that Joseph Smith was visited by them" (p. 6), though he equivocates on what counts as an angel and a visit.

Hutchinson blunts the force of his confession by asserting that "such events are so out of the ordinary that they are easily understood by their recipients in a variety of ways over their lives" (p. 6). And in the very next sentence he grants that "such things as visions and the visitations of angels after all are not uncommon even among today's Latter-day Saints" (p. 6). What follows is his account of what he thinks was a "development" in Joseph Smith's understanding of his experience with angels and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. He argues that Joseph Smith initially was visited by an amorphous, generic "angel" and only later began to embellish this visit (for theological purposes) into a character in his fiction by the name of Moroni.63 He is forced into this sophistry because otherwise he would end up having Joseph Smith "visit" with a figure from his imagination.

Hutchinson is forced into this rationalization precisely because he wants to get rid of real Nephites, while retaining for sentimental reasons some vestiges of angels in his "faith story." Hence he has had to shift to generic angels. And in order to do that he has to attribute the use of the names Moroni or Nephi for the angels who visited Joseph Smith to later recasting of the story by Joseph Smith for "theological reasons." He then has to explain away the plates; they have to become "visionary"—more or less than actual artifacts. And something has to blur the testimony of the witnesses to the plates and the angel.

In this way Hutchinson manages to turn the story of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon into the elements of a grand "myth," and by doing that it ceases to be of interest, except for

63 Since the earliest texts do not provide a name for the angelic visitor, Hutchinson concludes that Moroni was not a real individual in the ancient world.
sentimental purposes. But Hutchinson goes even further, since he then demythologizes the myth and ends up with platitudes about following Jesus, living by faith rather than sight, and so forth. This is a path already taken by Protestant liberals. And it caught on in German academic circles in the 1830s.

**Miracle, Myth, and History**

As we have seen, Hutchinson is anxious to exempt the resurrection of Jesus from his effort to turn into “myth” the prophetic truth claims contained in the scriptures. His stance on this matter can be compared and contrasted with a recent effort by cultural Mormons to legitimize a naturalistic explanation of key elements in the understanding of Jesus. In a volume released by Signature Books in 1990, we find the following:

Nothing in the evangelists’ accounts has generated more concern, produced more discussion, or elicited more controversy than the accounts of Jesus’s miracles. In the main tradition of Christianity, they have generally been accepted as literally true. The more skeptical have rejected their historicity with varying explanations for their inclusion in the Gospels. Those explanations have referred to the credulity, superstition, and mythical propensities of the early Christians and the Gospel writers, the attempts of the early church to celebrate the supernatural powers of Jesus to establish conclusively his messiahship and to place him in the line of prophets as harbinger of the Kingdom, the Son of God. The miracles have been variously treated as literal truths, myths, legends, allegories, and symbols.  

Obert C. Tanner, Lewis M. Rogers and Sterling M. McMurrin, the authors of *Toward Understanding the New Testament*, claim that “a full consideration of the miracles” in the New Testament, “of course, includes not only those allegedly performed by Jesus but also the accounts of his

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miraculous birth, his resurrection, his appearances to the disciples, and his ascension.”

These authors then recommend, as “an interesting, exhaustive treatment of the problem of the miracles, . . . the early (1835) monumental work by David Friedrich Strauss.” In so doing, they thereby reach back to a primary source for the treatment of the resurrection and related materials in the New Testament as mythological. They do so because they are confident that, in what they call “an age of science and scientific intelligence,” those who are skeptical reject the historicity of the miraculous because it appears to be mythological.

Tanner, Rogers, and McMurrin then claim that “the problem of miracles in the New Testament cannot be divorced from the analysis of myth and its prevalence in Jewish eschatology of Jesus’ time.” They also claim that Rudolf Bultmann’s “concept of demythologizing the New Testament . . . contributed importantly to the enthusiasm for biblical study over the last several decades.” They recommend a little book by Bultmann in which he grounds his demand for demythologization on the assumption that “the whole conception of the world which is presupposed in the preaching of Jesus in the New Testament is mythological.” New Testament writers take for granted “the intervention of supernatural powers in the course of events, and the conception of miracles,” and so forth. According to Bultmann, such a “conception of the world we call mythological because it is different from the conception of the world which has been formed and developed by science . . . and which has been accepted by all modern men.” He also insists that “the modern study of history . . . does not take into account any intervention of God . . . in the course of history. Instead, the course of history is considered to be an unbroken whole, complete in itself.”

For Tanner, Rogers, and McMurrin the relationship of myth and history goes back to David Strauss, who gained notoriety in

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66 Toward Understanding the New Testament, 89.
67 Ibid., 89 n.19.
68 Ibid., 75.
69 Ibid., 75–76.
70 Ibid., 76 n.39.
71 Bultmann, Jesus Christ and Mythology (New York: Scribner, 1958), 15. He has in mind a universe closed to the actions of deity, which he describes as the “transcendent,” whatever that means.
1835 when he published his famous *The Life of Jesus*. According to Edgar Krentz, "Strauss began the 'really significant era of criticism of the New Testament' with the publication of *Das Leben Jesu* (1935). Strauss, in part, still a child of rationalism," according to Krentz, denied "the historicity of all miracles, the resurrection, and most of the content of the Gospels. However, he tried to save the eternal truths contained in [what he thought were] the historically dubious materials [in the New Testament] through the concept of myth." What he included within the category of the so-called "mythological" were stories that he regarded as merely metaphorical vehicles through which some "spiritual" or perhaps moral truths might have been conveyed to discerning readers. He treated what he considered mythological as parabolic or highly symbolic, thereby turning much of the New Testament into (1) legends intended to ennoble Jesus, (2) historical myths which clothe the picture of Jesus by mingling fact and fiction, and (3) pure myth drawn upon to frame the entire text in messianic expectations and to see God directly at work in human affairs.

Something like this is what Hutchinson’s program involves, though his is neither sophisticated nor carefully reasoned. And Hutchinson’s program is not the one necessarily recommended by McMurrin or followed by at least some other authors whose essays appear in *New Approaches*. Hutchinson’s program shares with David Strauss the idea that some "spiritual" truths

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72 Given their awareness of Kee’s popular textbook, it is odd that Tanner, Rogers, and McMurrin seem unaware of Kee’s useful *Miracle in the Early Christian World: A Study in Sociohistorical Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), especially since this study examines in some detail the place of David Strauss in the discussion of miracles and what he calls “history and myth.” (See pp. 16–18.) It should be noted that Kee couples his treatment of miracles with an effort to refine the understanding of historical method among those engaged in biblical and religious studies because he thinks the methods being employed in those areas are in dreadful shape. (It should also be noted that Metcalfe seems unaware of Kee’s work, though he has much to say about methodological matters.) Kee argues that “what has often passed for historical analysis is little more than a classification system of phenomena along formal or simplistic conceptual lines. Historians have read modern categories and values back into ancient cultural epochs, rather than making the effort to enter empathetically into the world of a past time, place, and outlook.” (Ibid., vii.) His study of miracles is an effort to identify, illustrate and correct such mistakes.

can be salvaged from what is denigrated as the mythological stuffing found in sacred texts like the Book of Mormon.

But such endeavors have a history. It turns out that Hutchinson is imitating or even borrowing from an army of secularized scholars engaged in fashioning naturalistic readings of the Bible. From this history we can begin to see what the consequences are for the academic study of sacred texts and also for the life of the faith and the faithful.

For example, we are now being urged to jettison the belief that there really was a Lehi colony. Why? Because we must adopt something called the historical critical method. It is with this that Hutchinson and others want to read the scriptures as "myth" understood as fiction. Krentz locates the roots of this kind of approach to the Bible. In his little book he makes it clear that, from the perspective of David Friedrich Strauss, "reason destroys truth by its naturalistic explanations; the use of myth allows the preservation of truth in the face of rationalism."74 That seems to be a reasonably accurate description of Hutchinson's project, except that biblical scholars see myths at work among real peoples and places mentioned in the scriptures; they do not see, for example, the entire New Testament as a work of fiction in the way Hutchinson does the Book of Mormon.

When Krentz tells the story of how the subsequent employment of naturalistic explanations has worked out, he is something less than confident that the use of some concept of "myth" has accomplished what it was intended to do, that is, save "spiritual truths" from the corrosive effects of enlightenment rationalism. Krentz grants that some rather sticky problems still plague the discussion. For example, by finding myths everywhere in the New Testament, the German theologian-exegete Rudolf Bultmann "has been faulted for making the question 'What really happened?' irrelevant and thus actually denigrating history."75

Why is that so? Because mythology does not really tell us about what happened in the past; it merely involves the concerns of peoples confronted by an ambiguous and fearful world. "Myths speak about gods and demons," according to Bultmann, "as powers on which man knows himself to be dependent, powers whose favor he needs, powers whose wrath he fears. Myths

74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 68.
express knowledge that man is not master of the world and of his life, that the world within which he lives is full of riddles and mysteries and that human life is full of riddles and mysteries.”76 And “myth,” for Bultmann, “speaks of gods as if they were men and of their actions as human actions, as capable of breaking the normal, ordinary order of events.”77 Bultmann will have nothing to do with such nonsense, for “it may be said that myths give to the transcendent reality an immanent, this-worldly objectivity. Myths give worldly objectivity to that which is unworldly.”78

And in the Bible, including the New Testament, we find what Bultmann describes as crude mythological thinking in which God is situated in time and space; the divine is not reduced to some abstract categories such as a ground somehow standing beneath the world or to pure thought thinking about itself—something wholly transcendent. This offends Bultmann because he knows that God “is transcendent. The thinking which is not yet capable of forming the abstract idea of transcendence expresses its intention in the category of space; the transcendent God is imagined as being at an immense spatial distance, far above the world” and so forth.79 And Bultmann is confident that such conceptions “are no longer acceptable for modern man since for scientific thinking” such ideas have “lost all meaning, but the idea of the transcendence of God and of evil is still significant.”80

Bultmann, as is well-known, was enthralled by existentialism. In that philosophy he found the means to extract a meaning from the mythological thinking he found in the Bible. Whatever else one might say about such an enterprise, it depended upon the assumption that some current understanding of science is normative. Where Bultmann turned to existentialism, others struggled to accommodate less recondite positivist or historicist understandings to the message they extracted from the Bible when its message is understood as clothed in mythology. More recently there have been signs that thoughtful scholars are now more skeptical of the ideological assumptions upon which such endeavors rest.

76 Bultmann, Jesus Christ and Mythology, 19.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., 20.
80 Ibid.
Krentz therefore reports that the effort to integrate faith with history "has been accomplished by challenging the adequacy of historical method’s positivist axioms. God and history are not exclusive alternatives. Biblical criticism therefore has to challenge a view of reality that operates with a closed universe and an absolutely naturalistic ontology."\(^{81}\) In other words, if one does not begin with the assumptions upon which someone like Bultmann rests his project, the Bible takes on quite a different appearance and meaning.

But, unfortunately, some cultural Mormons are not at all skeptical of the viability of naturalistic accounts that assume a closed universe. For example, Tanner, Rogers, and McMurrin, after recommending Strauss’s 1835 *Life of Jesus* because it provides “an exhaustive treatment of the problem of miracles,” report that “the contemporary British historian Michael Grant sees them [that is, reports of the miraculous] from a naturalistic standpoint.” Of course, many writers operate with such assumptions. But Tanner, Rogers, and McMurrin do not hint that there is a viable alternative point of view—that naturalistic explanations are not the only way to deal with the scriptures.

But there is a debate over the adequacy of naturalistic explanations. The positivist and historicist assumptions at work in many such explanations are no longer taken for granted. Krentz claims, for example, that David Strauss used a concept of “myth,” which he describes as a naturalistic explanation, to preserve “truth in the face of rationalism.”\(^{82}\) Krentz also grants that there are writers who now insist that “historical explanation must recognize that God’s action has as much claim to serious attention in explanation as do naturalistic explanations.”\(^{83}\) Whatever their differences, this is exactly what Ashment, Metcalfe, and McMurrin dogmatically deny, while Hutchinson waffles on the issue.

Krentz also claims that among biblical scholars the “recent debate has circled around the historicity of the resurrection of

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81 Krentz, 68.
82 Ibid., 26. “For Strauss, Jesus was a wise man whom his ignorant contemporaries turned into a magician. We may wonder whether Strauss is entirely negative. He annihilates the traditional picture of Jesus and holds that we must believe in ‘the eternal Christ,’ the ideal of humanity as we conceive it in the nineteenth century.” Grant, 112.
83 Krentz., 69.
Jesus." That may be true for the larger community of scholars, but for Latter-day Saints the issues that are now being debated concern the historicity of the Book of Mormon and the way to approach the account of its coming forth and all that is linked to that account. Did Joseph Smith have encounters with real angels whose past is described in the Book of Mormon? Or was he merely an inventive, dissociative genius who made up a bunch of stuff and talked people into taking it and him seriously?

**Imitating the Mistakes of Others**

In Hutchinson we have someone who insists that Joseph made it up, but that God “inspired” him to do it. Hutchinson, more than the other authors whose essays are included in *New Approaches*, takes up these issues. Though he believes in angels and that Joseph Smith experienced an angel, he denies that Joseph visited with Moroni or Nephi. He has to make that claim or he would find himself in the quandary of having Joseph actually visit with figures from the fiction that he had fashioned. What exactly might constitute a visit with a generic or “non-Mormon” angel, when scripture is turned into “myth” (in the sense of being theology dressed up as fiction)? Are we to conclude that the angels whom Joseph Smith and others encountered were images in his dissociative mind? Hutchinson’s “generic angels” seem to be figments in the imagination of the dissociative Joseph Smith and his rustic associates.

Hutchinson concedes that some links to a real past must be found to ground Christian faith. Hence he wants Jesus to have been resurrected—that would provide at least some content and grounding for faith. But the content of Joseph Smith’s “inspiration” he turns into the fruit of undisciplined imagination and sentiment. And he seems to have done this because he wants to follow the lead of scholars who have been manipulating the Bible.

The theologians (who are not biblical scholars) who have fashioned various notions of “myth” have, for Hutchinson, suggested a model for understanding the Book of Mormon as fiction, and also for what constitutes inspiration, divine special revelation, and so forth. In so doing, he has fashioned a radically different mode of understanding crucial prophetic truth.

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84 Ibid.
claims. But, unfortunately for Hutchinson, those from whom he draws his scholarly inspiration do not necessarily hold that Jesus was in fact raised from the dead. Quite the contrary is the case. Paul Tillich, the late well-known German-American theologian, provides a fine example of one anxious to deliteralize the entire Christian message in such a radical way that even the necessity of there having been a Jesus disappears. But we can again turn to the large figure of Rudolf Bultmann who, unlike Tillich, in addition to being a theologian, was also a highly influential biblical scholar. Bultmann clearly followed his own theological bias, which was, as we have seen, naturalistic to the core, in his examination of the New Testament. For example, he began with the notion that the story of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was part of the “myth.” And he then reached the conclusion that the resurrection of Jesus simply never happened, except in the minds of primitive disciples who were unable to grasp or at least express the deeper truth manifest in the life of Jesus. Why?

Dead bodies, according to Bultmann, simply do not come back to life. The talk about the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is part of the mythological world of primitives incapable of grasping an abstraction Bultmann calls the “transcendent.” The resurrection is therefore part of the Christ of faith of primitives, but certainly not the Jesus of genuine history who is uncovered through historical method and with naturalistic explanations. Bultmann’s dogma should remind the reader of McMurrin’s “angels do not bring books.” But dressing up dogmatism as the fruit of reason does not disguise the intolerance with which scornful unbelievers brush aside prophetic truth claims. And McMurrin’s appeal to the “age of science and scientific intelligence” really gets us no further. With such language cultural Mormons merely disguise the problems inherent in skeptical, naturalistic approaches to the scriptures.

For those tempted to doubt that reducing the core elements of the story of Jesus to mythology has consequences for faith, please ponder the following: In 1953, in a debate with Bultmann, the late German philosopher Karl Jaspers asserted that from his perspective mythical ideas only disclose their meaning after having been divested of their apparent empirical reality as events, places and persons in a real past. Hence, those

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accounts that are labelled myths cannot be investigated by historical methods and are therefore no part of a genuine past, though a history of myths is, of course, possible, just as one might fashion a history of any illusion or delusion. The reason this is so, according to Jaspers, is that myths are composed of images, figures and symbols, which may appear to the naive as actual events, but they are "outside" the world we are able to know. Hence, myths are the substance of sacred stories and not genuine historical realities. To interpret a myth literally and not as code-language in which reality is attributed to figures, symbols, and what appear to be reports of actual events, is a perversion of its real or deeper meaning. "Therefore, thinkers in all ages, and Bultmann too, are right in denying assertions which give myth the tangible reality of things in the world, a reality that is accessible to our quite different real knowledge, a knowledge that modern science has developed and clearly delimited. A corpse [that is, the body of Jesus of Nazareth] cannot come back to life and rise from the grave. Stories based on reports of contradictory witnesses and containing scanty data cannot be regarded as historical fact."86

Bultmann did not deny what Jaspers said about the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus found in the New Testament. Instead, he granted that Jaspers "is as convinced as I am that a corpse cannot come back to life or rise from the grave."87 But Bultmann then wanted to know from Jaspers what a "theological scholar" (or an enlightened pastor) was to make of texts in which there are reports of the resurrection of Jesus, since the language of the New Testament appears to contain a number of reports of eye witnesses to the resurrection. From Bultmann's perspective, the New Testament contains myths expressing crude, primitive understandings of the world.88

To grasp the deeper truths Bultmann assumed are found in the New Testament, it must be demythologized. Jaspers saw

87 Ibid., 60.
88 I will grant that Christianity, when mythologized and then later deliteralized by the "theological scholar," may turn out to have some shreds of meaning, but it is certainly not the meaning that believers might have come to expect. And some such shred of meaning is certainly not what Latter-day Saints have thought that they had access to in the Book of Mormon and the story of its coming forth.
Bultmann’s project as an exercise in which a disguised “theology” serves a special interest—“that of ingeniously remolding a religion which is no longer believed, but is still desired, into a form acceptable to the ‘educated among the scornful,’ while passing over in silence the vital issues.” The same is true of Hutchinson’s project of turning the Book of Mormon into fiction, while still claiming that it contains an “inspired” message.

Hutchinson may not subscribe to all the details of the theology advanced by people like Tillich or Bultmann. He is far too sentimental for that—he really does have a pious streak—and he has what appears to be a genuine affection for the community. But he is also eager to turn the founding text of that community into fiction. He wants the Book of Mormon to function as part of a “myth” whose meaning he and other Enlightened Ones can then begin to unpack for the less insightful Saints. But for his project to have coherence, if not integrity, he must present an entirely compelling case for the stance taken by people like Tillich and Bultmann being wrong on certain issues. He seems to want them to be wrong on at least one crucial issue—the resurrection of Jesus. Hence, he has made one key concession: he now somewhat reluctantly admits that at least one key element of what he calls “myth” must be grounded in actual events—in reality—for there to be a message in the scriptures worthy of our attention. But he is enthralled by the notion of a “Mormon myth” the ground for which he understands as Joseph Smith’s fictional Book of Mormon.

Hutchinson does not have in mind, when he employs the word “myth” to describe the contents of the Book of Mormon, an historical reality in which there might really have been a Lehi colony. The only instance in which he will permit “myth” to be grounded in reality is the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Presumably, from his perspective, if that is not true, then there is no genuine justification for speaking of Jesus as the Christ. What he still wants to deny, however, is that there is anything in Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims that requires similar links with reality. Hence, when Joseph Smith tells of encounters with resurrected beings who are heavenly messengers, for Hutchinson that is merely part of what has been called “the Mormon myth.”

89 Jaspers and Bultmann, 33.
90 The expression “the Mormon myth” seems to have originated with Leonard J. Arrington. See his famous “Preface” to Great Basin Kingdom:

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and not part of a genuine historical reality. And, for Hutchinson, neither the Book of Mormon nor the story of its coming forth can ground faith or provide its contents, except for those with an "unreflective mentality" (p. 15).

**Interpretative Fashions and the Book of Mormon—Some Cautions**

I have argued elsewhere that for Latter-day Saints it has been what Professor Martin E. Marty and I have labelled "the acids of modernity"—ideologies grounded in an uncritically accepted and hence dogmatic rationalism growing out of the enlightenment—that have led to the dogmatic rejection of the prophetic truth claims of the Restored Gospel.\textsuperscript{91} The Saints have texts that seem to provide eyewitness accounts of encounters with plates and angels and the resurrected Jesus. And they also have a complicated text that claims to be an authentic ancient history. How then does one come to know that angels do not bring books? Exactly how did Bultmann know that dead bodies have not and cannot ever come back to life? Well, for Bultmann, it was the "scientific world view"—the currently fashionable ideology that stands behind the skeptical, secularized intellectual’s understanding of the limits of human understanding—that required that he explain such claims in naturalistic terms. From his perspective, only primitives, that is, those who are still in thrall to a prescientific understanding of the world, can really believe that those accounts describe an historical reality.

For those Karl Jaspers labelled the "educated among the scornful," to accept what is found in the New Testament, the crucial historical and prophetic claims found in that text must be deliteralized by being seen as a mythology filled with symbols and not genuine events in a real history. Then the contents of texts like the New Testament and Book of Mormon can be manipulated by learned and cynical theologians or exegetes; they can eventually be demythologized, thereby allowing their pre-

sumably deeper messages to be rendered in the vernacular of some fashionable ideology or popular philosophy. This may be what Hutchinson has in mind when he opines that “understanding the Book of Mormon as a fictional work of nineteenth-century scripture has real advantages. The book opens up for interpretation when read this way. The stories take on an added dimension far beyond, I find, any that was lost when I stopped believing in historical Nephites” (p. 17).92

Immediate after World War II, Bultmann wanted to popularize a demythologized understanding of the message of the New Testament. He did this in a language borrowed more or less from what he could make out of a school of philosophy sometimes known as existentialism. Of course, his efforts were mostly merely amusing to philosophers and his endeavors are no longer fashionable even in divinity schools. That is just the way it is with academic fads and fashions. Other ideologies have supplanted existentialism. Hence we are now more likely to hear of feminist or postmodernist readings of the Book of Mormon, or of deconstructing that text, rather than appeals to a now virtually forgotten existentialism. But to get to this point, something like Hutchinson’s flawed project must be adopted. That is, the Book of Mormon will have to be read as fiction, either “inspired” or, more likely, merely marginally inspiring to the exegete armed with some new mode of interpreting texts. The Saints should avoid such trendy sophistry. We do not build or defend the Kingdom or make ourselves genuine disciples of Jesus Christ by attempting to appear sophisticated or by mouthing slogans borrowed from an essentially foreign culture. We may better serve the Kingdom by maintaining a safe distance from such worldly ideologies.

The Saints need to develop an exegetical tradition where close attention is given to the Book of Mormon, And they also need more—not less—serious and genuinely competent scholarship. But such is not to be achieved cheaply. And it is not to be acquired by thoughtlessly capitulating to slogan-thinking or to some of the latest fads and fashions in the academic world. Instead of something thrust upon us by modern Nehorism or by

92 Compare Hutchinson’s similar closing remarks in his “A Mormon Midrash?” 70. In this essay he admits to having “suffered a sense of loss,” of having “experienced a certain disappointment,” when he denied the historicity of the texts that Joseph Smith claimed to have restored, though he claims to have found compensating advantages as well.
more obvious unbelievers, we must sustain our own authentic reading of the Book of Mormon. One possible way of resisting revisionist accounts of the Book of Mormon is by recognizing wily Nehoristic efforts to harmonize key elements of the Restored Gospel with secular or sectarian opinion and religiousity.

Biblical studies, of course, offer a wealth of insight and information, but we need to be cautious about the theological and interpretive assumptions that stand behind some of these studies. And, from the perspective of serious scholarship, Brent Metcalfe is neither properly motivated nor equipped to guide the Saints to some new light on the Book of Mormon. As we have seen, his agenda appears to be similar to that found among the more blatant anti-Mormons. He differs from them in that he is sufficiently savvy to at least mask his intentions. And hence he makes concessions to Tony Hutchinson and others who, despite their revisionist ideologies, still seem to have a streak of piety. Be that as it may, we can be confident that God did not “inspire” Joseph Smith to fabricate fiction.

93 Recently an effort was made to involve Latter-day Saints in a “dialogue” with, of all people, secular humanists (that is, atheists). The participants, according to the promotional materials, included “leading liberal Mormon thinkers and some of America’s best-known advocates of secular humanism.” This event was put on by something vaguely identified as the Institute for Inquiry, and was “co-sponsored by the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (CODESH), Inc, publisher of the Free Inquiry Magazine.” This stridently atheist magazine is edited by Paul Kurtz, who is perhaps best-known for having made fashionable the expression “secular humanism.” Participants at the conference held in Salt Lake City on September 24-26 included George D. Smith, L. Jackson Newell, Allen Dale Roberts, Martha Sonntag Bradley and Cecelia Konchar Farr. And, of course, Brent Metcalfe was there to discuss “Secular vs. Religious Interpretation of Scripture,” along with figures from the stable of atheist experts assembled by Paul Kurtz.

94 Making such materials available to Latter-day Saints has been begun by F.A.R.M.S. and certainly not by George D. Smith and Signature Books.