Title: An Apologist for the Critics: Brent Lee Metcalfe’s Assumptions and Methodologies

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An Apologist for the Critics: Brent Lee Metcalfe’s Assumptions and Methodologies

Reviewed by William J. Hamblin

Methodological discussions have become commonplace in Mormon studies. Yet a solid and detailed examination of the presuppositions, methods, arguments, and conclusions of the various readings of the Book of Mormon would still be very useful. Unfortunately, Brent Lee Metcalfe’s “Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity,” provides such a distorted and confused presentation of these issues that it obscures rather than enlightens. For me, the fundamental question is: Why are there such radically different explanatory models for the origin of the Book of Mormon? These models differ in both causal explanation—who wrote the Book of Mormon—and in interpretation—what is the original meaning of the text.

Essentially, the different interpretations of the origin of the Book of Mormon are based on five factors: (1) the surviving historical data is insufficient to answer many key questions, (2) much of the surviving historical data is contradictory (e.g., anti-

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1 The wider debate over the methods and presuppositions of historians has attracted considerable attention in the Latter-day Saint community. George D. Smith, ed., Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), contains a selection of essays—unfortunately not always the best examples—from differing perspectives, with additional references. Louis C. Midgley provides, from a traditional perspective, a complete bibliography with annotations of the debate in his forthcoming Mapping Contemporary Mormon Historiography: An Annotated Bibliography, 1950–1992, which includes 279 works by 102 authors.

2 Brent Lee Metcalfe, “Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity,” Dialogue 26/3 (Fall 1993): 154–84. Metcalfe’s approach is typical of a new and virulent strain of anti-Mormons who are secular in their presuppositions, scholarly in their pretensions, and deceptive in their presentations.
Mormon vs. Mormon views of Joseph Smith), (3) the issues relating to the origin of the Book of Mormon are highly controversial, (4) some fundamental issues (e.g., what Joseph really saw in the First Vision) cannot ultimately be resolved by historical methodologies, and (5) there are several inherently incompatible sets of presuppositions underlying the different interpretations of the origin of the Book of Mormon. Metcalfe apparently feels that none of these five factors is of great significance, and does not address them directly. Instead, he provides a different explanation as to why there are multiple interpretations for the origin of the text. The main thrust of Metcalfe’s paper is to demonstrate that all scholars who believe in and defend the proposition that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient document are merely “apologists,” whose methodology is flawed and whose conclusions are erroneous.

This is in stark and polar contrast with those Metcalfe deems “critical scholars,” who unanimously believe that the Book of Mormon is a nineteenth-century document. In Metcalfe’s Manichaean and reductionistic world view, the complexity surrounding the debate over the origin and meaning of the Book of Mormon is reduced to one issue: who uses or fails to use the proper methodology (as defined by Metcalfe). Yet Metcalfe’s evidence and argumentation cannot bear the burden of his proposition. His argument rests on the fallacy of a false dichotomy: although he admits that some apologists may be

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3 The paradigm devised by Metcalfe is a continuation of an assault by secularized Mormons against their believing critics. For an earlier description of the methods of supposedly uncritical “apologists,” see Anthony A. Hutchinson, “Latter-day Saint Approaches to the Holy Bible,” Dialogue 15/1 (Spring 1982): 99–124. Edward H. Ashment has recently denounced his intellectual rivals as mere “apologists” (“Historiography of the Canon,” in Smith, ed., Faithful History, 281–301). Metcalfe’s article is in some respects an inferior version of the arguments laid out by David P. Wright, “Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in the Search for Religious Truth,” Sunstone 16/3 (September 1992): 28–38, which, despite its many problems (see my “The Final Step,” Sunstone 16/5 [January 1993]: 11–12), is more cogent than Metcalfe’s article. For Wright, those who accept the antiquity of the Book of Mormon are “traditionalists.” Apologist is a neutral term; hence Wright talks of a “post-critical apologetic” category (35a), in which he places himself. Metcalfe fails to acknowledge the dependence of his paradigm on these and other earlier works.

4 “The fallacy of false dichotomous questions is a special form of the fallacy of many questions. . . . Dichotomy is a division into two parts. If it is properly drawn, the parts are mutually exclusive and collectively ex-
scholars of sorts, he nonetheless maintains that "apologist" and "critical scholar" are mutually exclusive categories. This false dichotomy arises from his failure to define his key terms. In order to understand the fundamental flaws in Metcalfe's argument, we must examine his implicit definitions of the key terms critical scholar and apologist.

**What Is the Critical-Historical Method?**

What are Metcalfe's definitions of a "critical scholar" and the "critical method"? Unfortunately, he never explicitly tells us what these terms mean. Perhaps he assumes that the definitions are so widely accepted that they require no comment. If so, he is mistaken.

Given the variety of the meanings that have been associated with "historical criticism," it will be obvious that any attempt to examine its claims must begin with a definition that limits it. It seems sensible too to define historical criticism in terms of its aim rather than in terms of its method, on the grounds that the aim should define the method rather than the method the aim, and that, while methods are likely to change as our knowledge and skill change, the aim should remain more or less the same. Historical criticism is criticism that tries to read past works of literature in the way in which they were read when they were new.

One finds no such sophisticated approach to historical criticism in Metcalfe. Rather, Metcalfe believes that a critical scholar is not only one who uses proper methodology, but one who

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5 "I do not consider 'apologists' and 'scholars' mutually exclusive categories" (p. 155 n. 9).
6 In several letters to Metcalfe I requested clarification on these and other points. In response he said he doubted the sincerity of my attempts to clarify my understanding of his definitions, refused to answer my questions, and forbade me from quoting from his private correspondence.
approaches the evidence with a certain set of presuppositions, and arrives at the proper conclusions (as defined by Metcalfe).

Here, however, one has to ask: Is there a single correct methodology universally recognized by all scholars as the only “critical” methodology? In one of the most recent summaries of the current state of methodological issues in biblical studies, William Baird tells us:

Looking back over this methodological variety [in biblical studies], one may wonder what methods are most appropriate. . . . The choice of method(s) can best be made in response to the questions which the interpreters bring. . . . This survey suggests that the Enlightenment model of historical criticism has become increasingly problematic. The variety of critical proposals indicates a current quest for a new paradigm which has yet to be realized.8

Thus, according to Baird, Metcalfe’s strong faith in the only correct methodology as the key to answering historical questions is misplaced and is not shared by many and perhaps even most modern philosophers of history.

Since Metcalfe gives us no precise idea of the “critical method” and how it should be applied, I am forced to infer that, for him, the “critical method” is his method. Functionally, only those who agree with Metcalfe are practitioners of the proper methodology; those who disagree with Metcalfe are mere “apologists.” This should become clear as this essay proceeds.

Fortunately, David Wright has provided a more detailed criticism of the supposed failure of traditionalists to use critical

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8 “Biblical Criticism,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., The Anchor Bible Dictionary, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:736 (hereafter cited as ABD), parentheses in the original. Note that Baird here agrees with Jackson that the questions or goals of the historian determine which method is most appropriate. Edward H. Ashment—whom Metcalfe cites with approval (182 n. 89)—has recently explicitly defended Enlightenment historiography as “similar to that of today’s scholarly world” (“Historiography of the Canon,” in Smith, ed., Faithful History, 287). Unfortunately, Ashment’s conversion to the Enlightenment comes only a couple of centuries too late. It reminds me of a student at BYU who recently decided to become a Marxist just as everyone else in the world was abandoning that failed ideology. For a review of Ashment’s appalling essay, see Gary Novak’s comments in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 5 (1993): 244-49.
methodology. Wright informs us that a "defining element of the critical mode [is] a willingness on the part of the researcher to acknowledge the possibility that historical matters may be different from what is claimed by a text and the tradition surrounding it." I quite agree. To analyze the text of the Book of Mormon we must consider the possibility that it may not be an ancient record. This does not, however, compel us to conclude that it must be a nineteenth-century record. Having considered the possibility of a nineteenth-century origin for the text, and having carefully analyzed the evidence, I find a plausible case can be made for the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. Why does this make me an "apologist"? In what element of the critical method have I failed? Is it that I have come to the wrong conclusion about the text, as judged by Metcalfe? Because my conclusions differ from those of the secularized interpreters, they argue that my methodology must be flawed. For this reason I have elsewhere argued that

secularists are unwilling to admit that it is possible to examine precisely the same evidence that they have seen, using precisely the same rigorous methods of inquiry, and yet come to honest, rational, and defensible conclusions concerning the historical questions surrounding the documents that differ from theirs.10

What Is an Apologist?

Exactly the same uncertainty that we have noted with regard to "critical-historical method" is found in Metcalfe's use of the word apologist. Let us first look at the general use of the term.11 Apologia is a Greek term meaning literally speaking in defense of or in behalf of someone. It could be used in Greek to refer to lawyers making a case—an apology or defense—for their

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9 Wright, "Historical Criticism," 29a.
10 Hamblin, "The Final Step," 11c.
11 For the standard range of meaning in English, see J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, The Oxford English Dictionary, 20 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 1:553–54. Nowhere in all the related entries is there a discussion of failure to use critical methodologies as a characteristic of apologetics, nor do they indicate that apologetics is the opposite of critical scholarship.
clients. In its broadest sense, then, apologetics is simply the defense of an intellectual position. Under this definition, Metcalfe and other secularized critics of the Book of Mormon are themselves apologists—they defend the position that the Book of Mormon is a nineteenth-century document. It is quite clear, however, that Metcalfe is not using the term in its most basic sense.

In the second century A.D., the term *apology* developed a specifically religious connotation. The Christian “Apologists” included Church Fathers such as Justin Martyr, Aristides, Melito of Sardis, Minucius Felix, Tatian, and Tertullian. The term then took on the broader sense of anyone who defends his religion against attacks. For example, T. W. Crafer defines apologetics as “the Christian defense against attack by non-Christians.” But I seriously doubt Metcalfe intended “the Mormon defense against attacks by non-Mormons” as his definition of apologetics.

A passage in *The Oxford Dictionary of Christianity* sheds some light on the definition of apologist:

The defence of the Christian faith on intellectual grounds. . . . It is not generally claimed that the essential truth of Christianity is certainly demonstrable by purely logical or scientific methods, but it is maintained that it is possible to show by these means that its acceptance is entirely in accordance with the demands of reason.

By analogy, Mormon apologetics would be the “defense of [Mormonism] on intellectual grounds” by attempting to demonstrate that the basic ideas of Mormonism are “entirely in accordance with the demands of reason.” Needless to say there is nothing here which would lead one to believe that apologists must perforce abandon proper critical methodology; on the contrary, if the beliefs of Mormonism are to be shown to be “in

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accordance with the demands of reason,” then the use of proper modern historical and other methodologies would seem to be a prerequisite. Under this definition, I am an “apologist”; indeed, I am proud to be a defender of the Kingdom of God.

Metcalfe’s Idiosyncratic Definitions

Unfortunately, Metcalfe does not use the term in this fashion, either. I find the best description of Metcalfe’s implicit definition of an “apologist” to be Peter Novick’s description of the opposite of an objective historian:

The objective historian’s role is that of a neutral, or disinterested, judge; it must never degenerate into that of advocate or, even worse, propagandist [here we might instead insert Metcalfe’s word, apologist]. . . . Objectivity is held to be at grave risk when history is written for utilitarian purposes. One corollary of all of this is that historians, as historians, must purge themselves of external loyalties: the historian’s primary allegiance is to “the objective historical truth.”¹⁶

Thus, for Metcalfe, the great sin of the “apologists” is that they are advocates of a position—that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient historical document—which happens to run counter to Metcalfe’s world view. Metcalfe provides us with two passages which indicate that I have correctly understood his underlying definition of apologetics. He seems to use the terms apologist and traditionalist interchangeably; if so, we learn that “‘traditionalism’ is distinguished . . . by belief that the Book of Mormon is only true if the personalities and events it describes were objectively real” (p. 154). Thus, for Metcalfe, apologetics is linked with belief in the historicity of the Book of Mormon. It seems that, for Metcalfe, this is the definitive characteristic of an apologist. This, of course, is mere special pleading based on conclusions, not methods.

Another passage from his essay also leads me to this understanding. Metcalfe asserts that “one non-LDS biblical scholar [Daniel Patte] has noted that for such interpreters [Christians

who Metcalfe feels resemble Latter-day Saint “apologists”] ‘truth and historicity are so much identified with each other that [they are] led to conclude: if it is true (according to my faith), it is historical’ ” (p. 154 n. 4).17

However, Metcalfe’s equation of Latter-day Saint scholars with the substance of Patte’s critique is problematic on several levels. First, it is quite clear that Patte is not explicitly talking about Latter-day Saints. In fact, Patte is discussing some types of Christian fundamentalists, as a full quotation of his remarks clearly indicates. “For this [Christian] fundamentalist exegete, truth and historicity are so much identified with each other that he is led to conclude: if it is true (according to my faith), it is historical.”18 Metcalfe provides absolutely no rationale for his equation of Latter-day Saint presuppositions with those of this Christian fundamentalist.19 But, unfortunately for Metcalfe, no matter how much he would like it, Latter-day Saints are neither scriptural nor revelatory inerrantists. Indeed, Metcalfe fails to demonstrate that the type of fundamentalist argument described by Patte has ever been used by any Latter-day Saint.20 He has simply found a secular scholar (Patte) who accuses Christian fundamentalists of a certain belief. Metcalfe then asserts that Patte’s argument should be extended to Latter-day Saint “apologists,” who are also somehow guilty of using the same argument simply because both happen to be believers in the historicity of something controversial.

Exactly what is it that Patte’s fundamentalists are accused of believing? It turns out that Patte has in mind the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. Interestingly, Anthony A. Hutchinson—whom Metcalfe clearly accepts as a critical scholar—now admits that “the power of a myth about redemption through Christ cru-

19 I believe that Metcalfe implicitly attributes inerrantist presuppositions to his “apologists.” Throughout his paper an underlying assumption on his part seems to be that if he can demonstrate that a prophet, scripture, or visionary experience is not infallible, it is therefore not inspired at all. For example, Metcalfe argues against what he apparently perceives as an “apologetic” position, that “prophetic experience is infallible” (p. 175).
20 Indeed, Patte himself provides no example of a Christian fundamentalist who actually makes the argument Patte claims they make. The entire issue seems to be a straw man devised by Patte, and transferred by Metcalfe to attack his Latter-day Saint rivals.
cified and resurrected . . . seems to me directly dependent on whether Jesus in fact died and then bodily reappeared to his disciples.”

If Hutchinson can make such a claim—which in fact is far closer to the argument critiqued by Patte than is the historical argument for the antiquity of the Book of Mormon—and still remain a critical scholar, according to Metcalfe, why are those who accept the historicity of the Book of Mormon mere “apologists”? Must not Hutchinson also be classified an “apologist,” because he insists on the historicity of the resurrection?

Actually, neither I nor any of my colleagues would ever assert the proposition: “if it is true, it is historical.” There are, of course, a wide range of truths which are ahistorical (truths of mathematics, physics, moral or philosophical truths, etc.). I would not even claim, “if it is historical, it is true.” For instance, I believe that the Buddha really lived—he is historical; likewise, Buddhism is historical. But I am not therefore a Buddhist—Buddhism is not true even though Buddha was historical. What I might argue—under certain conditions which I discuss below—is: “If it is not historical, it is not true.”

Throughout his entire discussion, Metcalfe has provided no evidence that any of his “apologists” make the assumption he contends is faulty. Since belief in this assumption seems to be the basis for the critique of his “apologists,” and since those scholars who annoy Metcalfe make no such claim, his critique collapses. Fundamentally, Metcalfe lumps scholars together into a single category who both employ a wide range of presuppositions and who use a range of methodologies, simply because they believe in the historicity of something. With his logic, we could call those who believe in the historicity of the Trojan War “Homeric apologists.”

In fact, Metcalfe hedges on his definition by granting that his so-called “apologists” “occasionally employ limited critical perspectives but only to promote traditionalist assumptions of historicity [of the Book of Mormon]” (p. 153). I am not sure what this phrase means, but I think he is simply saying that believers in the antiquity of the Book of Mormon use critical scholarly methodologies to support their position. In other words they are

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critical scholars after all—or would be if they only came to the right conclusions (read: agreed with Metcalfe).

Metcalf further admits that he does "not consider 'apologists' and 'scholars' mutually exclusive; while a scholar may be an apologist, all apologists are not scholars" (p. 155 n. 9). But the two elements of his statement appear to be logically contradictory:

Some scholars are apologists.
All apologists are not scholars.

Metcalf seems to mean that, "while a scholar may be an apologist, not all apologists are scholars." If I have understood him correctly, I am at a loss to discover what all the fuss is about. If an "apologist" (i.e., for Metcalfe, one who believes in the historicity of the Book of Mormon) can also employ "critical perspectives," then there is no absolute antithesis between the use of critical methodologies and belief in the historicity of the Book of Mormon. The methodological errors pointed out by Metcalfe are therefore not inherent in the "apologetic" world view, but are the personal errors of individual scholars, for which they alone are responsible. I will readily grant that scholars who accept the historicity of the Book of Mormon make errors in their analysis. But the same is of course true for scholars who accept a nineteenth-century origin. However, as I have argued elsewhere:

If a Latter-day Saint writes a bad book filled with fallacious arguments about the Book of Mormon, it does not automatically become the normative "Mormon position" for which all Latter-day Saints are ever after responsible. Furthermore, the existence of a bad book on the Book of Mormon does not prove that good books cannot or have not been written. Fallacious arguments can be given for true propositions. By proving that certain fallacious arguments have been presented to support the proposition that the Book of Mormon is authentic history, [a critic has] not thereby demonstrated that the basic proposition itself is false. [He has] only shown that
the proposition has not been proven by those fallacious arguments.22

As I see it, Metcalfe’s claims are cognitively meaningless, because they are tautological. For Metcalfe, anyone who disagrees with him by accepting the historicity of the Book of Mormon is an “apologist,” while those who agree with Metcalfe by rejecting the antiquity of the book are “critical scholars.”23 A more transparently obscurantist and self-serving case of special pleading is difficult to imagine.24

The Credentials of the Apologists

Metcalfe’s identification of his ideological opponents as “apologists” becomes even more problematic when we examine the variety of international scholarly activities of those “apologists.”25

23 In order to clarify this matter, I asked Metcalfe in a personal letter to provide an example of someone who believed in the historicity of the Book of Mormon but was not an apologist. In response he provided me an example of someone who did not believe in the historicity of the Book of Mormon, but who was an apologist. When I pointed out his misreading of my question and asked for clarification, he refused further correspondence on the matter.
24 Metcalfe is following traditional anti-Mormons who describe those who support their position as “scholars,” and those who disagree with their position as “apologists.” For examples, see Daniel C. Peterson, “Chattanooga Cheapshot, or the Gall of Bitterness,” in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 5 (1993): 14-19, 77 n. 170. Charles M. Larson is an interesting case in point. According to John Gee, “A Tragedy of Errors,” Review of Books on the Book of Mormon (1992) 4:101 n. 24, “Larson’s view of [Edward H.] Ashment is ambivalent at best. He cannot seem to make up his mind whether Ashment is ‘a respected LDS Egyptologist’ (p. 128), a fellow apostate (pp. 147-78), or one of a number of ‘LDS apologists’ (p. 164). When Ashment agrees with Larson, Larson speaks well of him; when Ashment does not, Larson does not.” Let me clarify this matter for Mr. Larson. Ashment is not an Egyptologist; rather, he is an insurance salesman who once studied Egyptology at Chicago.
25 None of the societies, journals, editors, or publishers listed below are associated with Mormon studies. If I added books, articles, and presentations on specifically Latter-day Saint topics the list could be further expanded.
The “apologists” mentioned by Metcalfe include scholars who have received doctorates or law degrees from Berkeley, Brown, Duke, Florida State, Harvard, the University of California at Los Angeles, the University of Michigan, and the University of Utah.²⁶

Some of Metcalfe’s “apologists” have presented papers at conferences such as those of the American Academy of Religion, the American Association for Italian Studies, the American History Association, the American Oriental Society, the American Research Center in Egypt, the British Association for Jewish Studies, the British Society of Middle Eastern Studies, the Congress of Asian and North African Studies, Société internationale d’histoire des sciences et de la philosophie arabes et islamiques, the Jewish Law Association, the Medieval Academy, the Middle East Studies Association, the National Association of Professors of Hebrew, the Society for the Study of Islamic Philosophy and Science, Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East, the Society of Biblical Literature, the Society of Christian Philosophers, the US Naval History Symposium, and the World History Association. These presentations have been given in Jerusalem, Hamburg, Liverpool, London, Paris, Toronto, and throughout the United States.

Books written by Metcalfe’s “apologists” have been published by such organizations as the American Institute of Islamic Studies, E. J. Brill, Edwin Mellen Press, Eisenbrauns, Gerstenberg Verlag, HarperCollins, the Pontifical Biblical Institute, and Scholars Press.


Now, I am the first to admit that having a doctorate, presenting papers, publishing articles, and writing books is no guaran-

²⁶ By comparison, Metcalfe himself is an autodidact who never attended college. He has published and given presentations only within provincial liberal Latter-day Saint circles. (This does not, of course, mean that his ideas are necessarily wrong.)
tee of intelligence, good sense, use of proper methodology, acad­
demic rigor, correct interpretation, or the discovery of truth. But
it does lead one to be somewhat suspicious of the criteria being
used by Metcalfe to critique the scholarship of professional aca­
demics whose work has been so widely accepted and published
in international scholarly circles. On the face of it, it seems clear
that Metcalfe’s “apologists” are quite capable of producing pro­
fessional scholarly work. If so, Metcalfe must provide an expla­
nation for their apparent schizophrenia—are they capable of
using proper historical methodology only when dealing with non­Latter-day Saint topics, while seemingly reverting to uncrit·
cical apologetics when discussing Latter-day Saint topics? If
Metcalfe wishes to advance this hypothesis, he will once again
engage in special pleading: the “apologists” are perfectly capable
of scholarship—except when they disagree with Metcalfe.

What Are the Major Assumptions in Book of Mormon
Studies?

I believe we arrive at a more accurate understanding of the
problems surrounding interpretation of the Book of Mormon by
examining governing assumptions for different interpretative
models. As I see it, there are five major competing explanatory
models or paradigms. Each of these is distinguished from the
others by differing sets of assumptions, as summarized in Table
1. I believe that Metcalfe fails to distinguish between these
approaches. Instead, Metcalfe reduces the complexity of the
issue into a dualistic battle between (bad) apologists and (good)
critical scholars.

I have given the following names to the five major
paradigms: evangelical, doctrinal traditionalist, historical tradi·
tionalist, theistic naturalist, and secular naturalist.27 The dis­
tinguishing characteristics and assumptions of these five
paradigms can be discovered by noting the answers to five
questions.

27 There are, of course, subunits within each paradigm. For example,
there are numerous possible variants within the secular naturalist paradigm
as a whole, the major point of differentiation being whether Joseph Smith
was sincere but deluded, or a lying charlatan (as per Brodie). Thus, my
model can be useful only when remembering it is also an oversimplifica­
tion.
Table 1. Basic Assumptions in Book of Mormon Studies

1. *Does God Exist?* This is a basic question for anyone attempting to deal with religious phenomena. It fundamentally colors all interpretations given to historical data. If God is presumed to exist then he may be able to act, not only in a directly causal fashion (miracles, control of historical forces), but also in a revelatory fashion—by revealing his will, his commandments, and information which a prophet would not ordinarily know. The evangelical, doctrinal traditionalist, historical traditionalist, and theistic naturalist paradigms all presume the existence of God; the secular naturalist paradigm is technically agnostic, but functionally atheistic, presuming that all historical phenomenon can and should be explained as if God did not exist.

2. *Does God Intervene in the World in Supernatural Ways?* Just as important as the question of the existence of God is the question of the nature of God’s intervention in the world. If God exists, how does he interact with humans? What types of events can he cause to happen? What historical processes can he control? What type of information can he reveal, and in what ways? The evangelicals, doctrinal traditionalists, and historical tradi-
tionalists all agree that God intervenes in history in miraculous ways. The secular naturalists reject this.

The position of the theistic naturalists concerning supernatural events is complex and somewhat ambiguous. I believe that, in practice, most theistic naturalists use precisely the same environmental and naturalistic arguments in explaining the origins of the Book of Mormon as do the secularists: Both agree that the work derives solely from the nineteenth century, usually with Joseph Smith as the sole author. For this reason I have elsewhere called theistic naturalists “soft” secularists.28 Thus, although the theistic naturalists insist that God can theoretically intervene in history, they often redefine the nature and range of God’s possible intervention in such a way as to make their causal explanations functionally indistinguishable from those of the secular naturalists. For example, many theistic naturalists—paralleling Korihor and Sherem—deny the possibility (or, at least, the reality) of true predictive prophecy.29 They then insist that all examples of predictive prophecy must be anachronistic—written after the events prophesied. Therefore, they date ancient texts containing predictive prophecy to accommodate this world view. For example, when Isaiah accurately describes the Babylonian captivity, the text is automatically dated to after the Babylonian captivity. When historical traditionalists reject the validity of this line of reasoning for dating a particular text, we are accused of rejecting “critical methodology.” This is circular reasoning at its finest.

3. Is the Book of Mormon Ancient? On this question the evangelicals, and both theistic and secular naturalists, are in agreement that the text derives from the nineteenth century, while the doctrinal and the historical traditionalists insist that the nineteenth-century English text is a translation of an ancient record.

4. Is the Book of Mormon Inspired? Doctrinal and historical traditionalists, and theistic naturalists, all agree that the Book

of Mormon is inspired, while the evangelicals and the secular naturalists reject its inspiration. The position of the theistic naturalists, however, is much more ambiguous than it at first seems; I believe that most theistic naturalists limit God’s intervention in history to the creation of vague interior emotional states. As I have described elsewhere:

“Soft” secularists [or theistic naturalists], while admitting that God exists, refuse to allow him to intervene in the world in any meaningful way. The result is that in analyzing historical events or texts, one can effectively dismiss God as a causal factor. Thus, Wright’s statement that “the main theoretical recommendation for the critical mode is that it is consistent: it treats all media of human discourse—secular and holy—in the same way” (29b) is another way of saying that Wright’s “critical mode” denies God’s meaningful intervention in history; all texts are therefore made by humans, with no authentic (i.e., propositional) revelation from God. If the existence of authentic revelation is denied, then revelation can be redefined so as to be reduced to states of mind that can be dismissed as internally induced by hard secularists. God’s permitted behavior is limited to creating some vague emotion that is psychologically indistinguishable from creative genius, imagination, feeling good, or falling in love.

For the purely historical questions surrounding the Book of Mormon, the theistic naturalist paradigm which posits Joseph as an inspired author of a nineteenth-century text, and the secular naturalist paradigm which posits Joseph as an uninspired author of a nineteenth-century text, are functionally equivalent, since both account for the origin of the text in precisely the same way. The only difference is that the theistic naturalists add God as an additional final link in the causal chain—an addition which the secular naturalists reject as superfluous. In theory this seems to be a significant difference, but in practice, when pressed on the matter, theistic naturalists generally find it difficult to identify

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30 It would be useful to have theistic naturalists draw up a list of “miracles” in early Latter-day Saint history which are more than interior psychological states of mind.

31 Hamblin, “The Final Step,” 11a, citing Wright, “Historical Criticism.”
specific historical events surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon which they view as supernatural.32

In this regard, an unfortunate recent development has been the attempt to redefine inspiration in a way that allows some secular naturalists to proclaim their belief in the “inspired” nature of the Book of Mormon, while failing to mention that, incidentally, they are not sure that there even is a God. Metcalfe is an example of this phenomenon, which amounts to using the term “inspiration” in an artistic rather than a revelatory sense. Thus, even though Metcalfe is an agnostic,33 he still talks of Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon as “inspired” (p. 184). What he means by this is simply that Joseph was the “inspired” author of the Book of Mormon in the same vague sense that Michelangelo was “inspired” in his painting and sculpture. Such statements are dishonest because they are incomplete and misleading.

5. Use of Historical Methodologies? This final question allows us to distinguish between the assumptions of the doctrinal traditionalists and the historical traditionalists. In my view, evangelicals and doctrinal traditionalists do not generally use historical methodologies, while historical traditionalists, theistic naturalists, and secular naturalists do.34 Although the doctrinal traditionalists accept the antiquity and inspiration of the Book of Mormon, their fundamental concerns are theological. Historicity is assumed, not argued; historical questions and issues are seldom dealt with. Rather, they attempt to use philosophical and

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32 Hutchinson, for example, while insisting that the Book of Mormon is somehow inspired (“The Word of God Is Enough,” 1–4), nonetheless goes to great lengths to claim that the visionary elements surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon happened only in the minds of the visionaries (pp. 6–7).

33 Metcalfe has publicly admitted to being an agnostic on the internet electronic mail bulletin board Morm-ant (Mormonism and Antiquities; see Morm-ant archives, Tue, 12 Oct 1993 09:53:23 -0600. Message-Id: <sca7d4f.016@WordPerfect.com>).

34 This does not necessarily mean that everyone uses historical methodologies equally well. My view runs counter to Metcalfe’s central thesis that no one who accepts the historicity of the Book of Mormon employs critical methods. Some might argue that traditional anti-Mormons do use historical methods. This may be true in some cases but, in fact, the vast majority of evangelical tracts on the Book of Mormon are ahistorical in approach. At any rate, whether the Evangelical approach to the Book of Mormon uses critical methods or not is irrelevant to the main thesis of my paper.
homiletic methodologies in order to extract doctrinal content from the text.35

To the extent that I am correct that there are Latter-day Saints who consciously abandon the use of historical methods by focusing solely on the doctrinal content of the Book of Mormon, is Metcalfe's critique of them as uncritical "apologists" accurate? Not at all. First, many, if not most, of the scholars Metcalfe identifies as apologists in his article operate within the historical traditionalist paradigm. But, secondly, the doctrinal traditionalists are simply asking different questions about the text, questions which are nonhistorical, and which cannot be answered by historical methods. Thus, criticizing the doctrinal traditionalists for not using historical methods is rather like criticizing them for not using the methodologies of higher mathematics. Neither set of methods is of use in answering the questions they pose.36

It is quite apparent from the table that the theistic naturalists and the secular naturalists share two major assumptions: that the Book of Mormon is not ancient, and that God does not intervene in the world in ways which are identifiable by historical methods. These shared assumptions have led in recent years to an "unholy alliance" between the secular naturalists and some theists-

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35 This is the explicit approach of Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, _Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon: Volume I—First and Second Nephi_ (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 1:xv. Although most doctrinal traditionalists would find historical studies of the Book of Mormon interesting, some might argue that the studies of the historical traditionalists are counterproductive, since they can upstage important doctrinal issues and may raise historical questions in the minds of readers which can never be fully answered, thereby planting seeds which can undermine faith.

36 An important exception to this general rule is in the frequent occurrence of what could be called the "presentist fallacy" in the writings of some doctrinal traditionalists. For me the presentist fallacy is faulty contextualization of the Book of Mormon by reading nineteenth and twentieth century Mormonism into an ancient document. In this, the doctrinal traditionalists oddly parallel the theistic and secular naturalists in that they all three assume that all doctrines and practices of the Book of Mormon should closely resemble nineteenth- (or twentieth-) century Mormonism. The doctrinal traditionalists assume this because of their presupposition that the concept of the eternal gospel implies that _all_ doctrines and practices of antiquity—rather than just the fundamentals—must precisely parallel modern Mormonism (see Louis Midgley, "Prophetic Messages or Dogmatic Theology: Commenting on the Book of Mormon: A Review Essay," _Review of Books on the Book of Mormon_ [1989] 1:101–3). The naturalists commit this fallacy because they assume that the text was written in the nineteenth century.
tic naturalists. By ignoring their fundamental differences over the existence of God and the inspired nature of the Book of Mormon text, secular naturalists and theistic naturalists can pretend to share a similar paradigm. The axis around which they have combined forces is nineteenth-century environmental explanations of the Book of Mormon. Thus, we find that theistic naturalists, such as David Wright, Mark Thomas, and Anthony Hutchinson—who still profess to believe in God and in the "inspired" nature of the Book of Mormon—will ally themselves with agnostic secular naturalists such as Dan Vogel, Brent Metcalfe, and George D. Smith. In part, this is accomplished through disingenuousness on the part of the secular naturalists, who dissimulate concerning the existence of God—and therefore the nature of inspiration—in order to gain the alliance of believing Mormons and thereby legitimate their enterprise. Unfortunately, many theistic naturalists discover this agenda too late, thereafter finding it quite difficult to leave the employ of or identification with the secular naturalists.

Granted that the theistic naturalists and the historical traditionalists share some assumptions about the nature of the Book of Mormon, an argument being widely presented by the theistic naturalists is that an ahistorical but "inspired" Book of Mormon can be an authoritative scripture for the Church. Can this assertion of the theistic naturalists be accepted? From the point of view of the historical traditionalists, what precisely is the problem with an inspired but nineteenth-century Book of Mormon?

The Importance of the Antiquity of the Book of Mormon

Both theistic and secular naturalists frequently insist that a text can be inspired or true without being "historical." For example, a parable such as the Good Samaritan can teach doctrinal or ethical truths even though the people and events mentioned in the parable never existed. The situation with the historical content of the Book of Mormon, however, is quite different. In fact, this is a fairly simple argument, which has been

37 Metcalfe himself seems to endorse this claim (p. 155), even though he is an agnostic secularist who does not accept the Book of Mormon as "inspired" in any religious sense (see my n. 32 above).
explained in print before. The historical argument for the necessity of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon is as follows:

1. Joseph Smith claimed to have had possession of golden plates written by the Nephites, and to have been visited by Moroni, a resurrected Nephite.

2. If the Book of Mormon is not an ancient document, there were no Nephites.

3. If there were no Nephites, there were no golden plates written by Nephites; and there was no Nephite named Moroni.

4. If there was no Moroni and no golden plates, then Joseph did not tell the truth when he claimed to possess and translate these nonexistent plates, and to have been visited by a resurrected man.

5. Hence, Joseph was either lying (he knew there were no plates or angelic visitations, but was trying to convince others that there were), or he was insane or deluded (he believed there were golden plates and angelic visitations which in fact did not exist).

If theistic naturalists wish to maintain that the Book of Mormon is not an ancient document, but that Joseph Smith was somehow still a prophet, they must present some cogent explanation for Joseph’s wild claims of possessing nonexistent golden plates and being visited by nonexistent angels. Thus the argument is not “If the Book of Mormon is not ancient, then it is not scripture,” as Metcalfe would have us believe, but “If the Book of Mormon is not ancient, then Joseph Smith was not a prophet.”

I have never seen any theistic naturalist come to grips with this argument; instead they consistently sidestep the

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38 Most recently, in my “The Final Step,” 11–12. It seems that Metcalfe has not understood this argument about the significance of the antiquity and historicity of the Book of Mormon (p. 171).

39 In this paper I am focusing on what I see as the strongest historical argument for the necessity of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. There are also, however, other important arguments for the necessity of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. For example, the Book of Mormon purports to have been written “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God” (title page). If the Book of Mormon is a work of nineteenth-century fiction, it provides no more convincing evidence of the divinity of Christ than does the nineteenth-century novel *Ben Hur*. For additional arguments for the necessity of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon, see Dallin H. Oaks, “The Historicity of the Book of Mormon,” F.A.R.M.S. paper, 1994; and Robert Millet, “The Book of Mormon, Historicity, and Faith,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/2 (Fall 1993): 1–13.
issue by denouncing the historical traditionalists for having a naive view of scripture, just as Metcalfe does in his essay (p. 155).

Consider the following analogy: Suppose for a moment that Jesus never existed. The apostle Paul nonetheless claimed that on the road to Damascus he had a vision of the resurrected Jesus. The conclusion which the theistic naturalists would wish us to accept is that we should all be Christians on the strength of Paul’s vision of the nonexistent Christ, because, after all, the four Gospels still make inspiring reading, just as they may also teach important ethical values, and provide us with a sense of community. The absurdity of this position is manifest, yet it is analogous to the proposition which the theistic naturalists would have us accept. I, for one, am not willing to sell my true birthright for this incoherent mess of pottage.

In fact, Metcalfe actually seems to accept my line of reasoning here. He differs from me by rejecting Joseph’s prophetic claims. Others, however, profess to maintain some type of faith in the prophethood of Joseph, without providing a rational justification for that faith. For example, I specifically challenged David P. Wright to provide a response to this argument. Wright chose to ignore this crucial challenge and, obfuscating the issue, asked that I accept his views as legitimate—based on an appeal to “tolerance.” Wright fears that my position will cause “many who might have flourished in a more magnanimous and encouraging community [to be] pressed socially and emotionally to take the ‘final step’ [apostasy] that Hamblin seems to recommend to me here.” I make no such recommendation. My recommendation to Wright is that he renew his faith in the Gospel and in the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. But, be that as it may, if he wishes to remain a member of the Church—for

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40 This type of argument seems to me like a frantic attempt to salvage some vestige of faith from the wreckage of a lost testimony. Those who do this are reduced to wishing desperately and hoping against all reason that somehow the Gospel can still be true. Paradoxically, my “apologetic” faith is only strong enough to believe the improbable, while the “critical” faith of these secularized, cultural Mormons is asking us to believe the impossible.

41 Hamblin, “The Final Step,” 12b.

42 David P. Wright, “The Continuing Journey,” Sunstone 16/5 (July 1993): 14c. Anthony Hutchinson, followed by Metcalfe (pp. 175–79), has also made an unsuccessful attempt to deal with this issue, which I will discuss below.
whatever reason—I welcome him into the community. Still, my communal tolerance in this matter does not mean that I am required to accept his theologically and logically flawed arguments as somehow equally legitimate or even “true.” I feel perfectly at liberty to publicly disagree with his personal heterodoxies, and to challenge the coherence of his position. Furthermore, he, not I, must take responsibility for the loss of faith and apostasy that will necessarily ensue among members of the Church who are unable to perform the mental gymnastics required to ignore the logical gaps in his position and retain their faith. Most will conclude that, if Wright is correct, the Church is false. Blaming me for the effects of the crisis of faith brought by an encroaching secularism is simply blaming the messenger for the message; because I happen to announce that the emperor has no clothes, I am blamed for the embarrassment at his public nudity. The naturalists are the emperor’s tailors.43

Historicity and Truth

Thus the real historical problem is quite different from the one Metcalfe claims is central to the “apologist” enterprise. Metcalfe would have us believe that I (whom he would place squarely in the camp of the apologists) am arguing that “the Book of Mormon is only true if the personalities and events it describes were objectively real” (p. 154). In fact, this is simply Metcalfe’s own faulty presentation of the argument. He is thereby obscuring the real issue of the connection between the antiquity and historicity of the Book of Mormon and the prophethood of Joseph Smith, by shifting the grounds of the argument from the historical truth of the events of the book, to the ethical or doctrinal truth of statements that are made in the text. While it is quite true that doctrinal statements made in the Book of Mormon—such as “Jesus is the Christ”—may be true

43 I have always felt a strong skepticism about anti-Mormon pamphlets which claim to tell us “The Truth about Mormonism.” I am equally skeptical when this “Truth” comes from dissenting Mormons. What is being passed off as “the Truth” is simply a collection of personal opinions and interpretations. On a more general level, what I am condemning is muddled thinking which, in the name of “tolerance,” insists that we allow secularized, cultural Mormons to proclaim their new gospel as legitimate Mormonism simply because they assert it is “the Truth,” claim it is not antithetical to fundamental principles of the gospel, and protest that they will feel bad if anyone criticizes their lack of coherence.
even if the book is not ancient, the prophethood of Joseph is still compromised. Furthermore, the authoritative power of the statement that "Jesus is the Christ"—even if it is true—is greatly diminished when we realize that the stories of the power, prophecy, and miracles of God, and of the resurrection of Jesus and his visitation to the New World, are simply pious fictions.

Let me state my position on the question of the relationship between historicity and truth. First, it is quite possible for scripture to be ahistorical. For example, the parables of Jesus are true, and yet entirely fictional. Likewise the story of Job may well be an extended parable. Second, I make no claim that everything in the Book of Mormon itself is in fact historical. For example, I doubt that anyone would argue that Zenos' allegory of the olive tree (Jacob 5) ever really happened. Likewise, it is possible that there may be historical or scientific mistakes in the Book of Mormon.

Thus, the issue is not, as Metcalfe would have us believe, that the Book of Mormon must be historical for it to be considered scripture. The argument is that the Book of Mormon must be historical for Joseph to be a prophet. Those who would argue that Joseph is the prophetic author of a nineteenth-century pious forgery must provide a cogent explanation for why Joseph's prophetic claims should be taken seriously in light of the falsity of his visionary claims—a falsity which necessarily follows from the nonexistence of the plates and Moroni.

Metcalfe on Objectivity

Metcalfe's discussion of the problems of historicity betrays an ignorance of the issues, as is manifest in his fundamental misreading of the historiographical position of Louis C. Midgley. Since the term "objectivist" has come into disrepute both in general historical and Latter-day Saint circles, he seems

44 See the Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch, eds., The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1994).

determined to apply that epithet to his intellectual rivals in order to undermine their position.

Metcalfe begins his discussion by quoting Midgley, "[t]o be a Latter-day Saint is to believe, among other things, that the Book of Mormon is true, there was once a Lehi who made a covenant with God" (pp. 154–55 n. 7). Metcalfe then asserts that Midgley’s interpretations about the antiquity of the Book of Mormon may be historically factual or objective, but with what assumptions and based on what criteria can such objectivist claims be proffered? Midgley does not clarify how he would reconcile his absolutist faith assumptions with a hermeneutic of testimony which acknowledges limitations. . . . many hermeneutical apologists such as Midgley adopt the positivism they so readily condemn. They repudiate the possibility of historical objectivity in an empirical sense but insist on the historical objectivity of early Mormonism’s truth claims in a religious or confessional sense. (p. 155 n. 7)

This statement is so loaded with misconceptions that one hardly knows where to begin. First, Metcalfe uses “hermeneutical apologist” in his typically idiosyncratic way to condemn the position of those with whom he disagrees. He is apparently here referring to what I call a historical traditionalist who accepts the historicity of the Book of Mormon, and who addresses hermeneutical or interpretive questions.

Next, Metcalfe accuses Midgley of “adopt[ing] the positivism [he] so readily condemn[s].” Midgley a Positivist? The accusation is absurd; it demonstrates that Metcalfe has no idea what he is talking about. Whatever one might say about Midgley, he is certainly not a Positivist. Positivism is defined as “any form of philosophical outlook which rejects metaphysics, especially when the physical sciences are regarded as offering the norm of knowledge." It is thus agnostic in its outlook.

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Midgley is, of course, notorious for just the opposite—for condemning Revisionist historians for their failure to deal with metaphysical issues surrounding the origins of Mormonism and the Book of Mormon!48 When Midgley states that “[t]o be a Latter-day Saint is to believe, among other things, that the Book of Mormon is true, there was once a Lehi who made a covenant with God,” he is not claiming that we can objectively know that there was a Lehi colony; he is rather making an observation about faith—to be a Latter-day Saint does not require that we objectively prove that the Nephites existed, but that we believe they existed. It is a faith proposition. How this can possibly be seen as a manifestation of positivism is beyond me.

Third, Metcalfe naively equates being “historically factual” with being “objective.” He goes on to claim that Midgley “repudiates the possibility of historical objectivity in an empirical sense but insists on the historical objectivity of early Mormonism’s truth claims in a religious or confessional sense.” Metcalfe seems unaware of the distinction between ontology (theories about the nature of being and reality) and epistemology (theories about knowledge, perception, and cognition).49 Although sometimes related, they are still distinct. Midgley’s ontological position is that there exists a real past with real events. Midgley’s epistemological position is that those real past events cannot be objectively known through the use of historical methods. Thus, according to Midgley’s ontological position, either there really were Nephites and golden plates or there were not; either Joseph really saw God or he did not. But, for Midgley, although these facts may be historically real, they are objectively unverifiable by historical methods.

Most historians—even Positivists—would agree that there are numerous things which may be historically real (ontologically), but may be historically unverifiable (epistemologically).

48 Metcalfe may wish to assert that Midgley is a closet Objectivist. While most Positivists are Objectivists, not all Objectivists are Positivists.

49 Epistemology is the “branch of philosophy which is concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge, its presuppositions and basis.” Paul Edwards, Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 3:8–9. Metcalfe’s frequent misuse of technical philosophical terminology compounds his already serious misunderstanding of historiographical issues and is a classic example of the fallacy ad verecundiam. “More common and more subtle forms of argument ad verecundiam appear in appeals to all the paraphernalia of pedantry. Among them are: 1. Appeals to pedantic words and phrases …” (Fischer, Historians’ Fallacies, 285).
Most past events fall into this category because there are no surviving written or artifactual traces of those events. Indeed, most of the billions of people who have lived on the planet have left not a single shred of identifiable historical evidence that they ever existed at all.

For Midgley, the ontologically real past cannot be objectively known through the historical method. Among other factors this is so because of the fragmentary nature of the surviving evidence and the presuppositions that historians necessarily bring to their study of the past. Midgley is skeptical of the secular naturalist presupposition that there is no God, and that therefore all claims of divine causality in history should be reductionistically discounted and explained by naturalistic causes. In the case of the Book of Mormon, since secular naturalists insist that there is no God, any naturalistic explanation—no matter how absurd—is preferable to the explanation that there really were plates and angels.

Historical objectivism is an epistemological position that the past is not only knowable, but objectively knowable—not only that there was an ontologically real past, but that the past can be known as it really was, by means of historical methodologies. Furthermore, classical Objectivists would maintain that the presuppositions of the historian will not interfere with understanding the past—the historian can be a neutral and unbiased observer of the past. This is what Midgley rejects. Midgley thus takes the ontological position that there is a real past, but he also takes the epistemological position that this real past, despite its reality, cannot be objectively known through the historical method. These positions are by no means contradictory as Metcalfe would lead us to believe.

Whether Midgley is right or wrong in his stance, his position is no different than that of many respected non-Latter-day Saint philosophers of history; it is neither radical nor absurd. Should all of these non-Latter-day Saint philosophers also be condemned as “apologists” because they maintain philosophical positions accepted by some believers in the historicity of the Book of Mormon? If not, then why is Midgley to be categorized as a “hermeneutical apologist,” rather than simply a hermeneutist? The answer is, apparently, that he is so because he

50 For a full discussion, see Novick, That Noble Dream.
disagrees with Metcalfe, and Metcalfe wishes to label him with what Metcalfe sees as a pejorative label.

Metcalfe also wonders how Midgley "would reconcile his absolutist faith assumptions with a hermeneutic of testimony which acknowledges limitations" (p. 155 n. 7). Once again Metcalfe seems remarkably confused. First, I cannot imagine what a "hermeneutic of testimony" might consist of. Hermeneutics examines questions of the nature of interpretation of texts and images. Thus, while we might speak of an epistemology of testimony, there can be no hermeneutic of testimony, until and unless the testimony is verbally expressed or written down, after which it becomes an object of interpretation by others. For Midgley, even though the past may be knowable through revelation, such knowledge is hardly historically or religiously objective, as Metcalfe seems to think. Indeed, from a traditional Latter-day Saint perspective, testimony is inherently subjective, since each person must obtain his or her own testimony. For Midgley, personal revelation is a form of nonhistorical and nonobjective knowledge, including some forms of knowledge about the past. Such knowledge is not only not objective, it is not even historical, since it is not obtained by the historical method.

Metcalfe also informs us that "New Mormon Historians have been reprimanded by some apologists for being objectivists. . . . While I personally know of no New Mormon Historian who has ever suggested that Mormons must endorse his or her interpretation of history as true, I cannot say the same for some of their traditionalist critics" (p. 154 n. 7). I find, quite to the contrary, that some—though by no means all—naturalists betray remarkable intellectual intolerance. Metcalfe himself, for example, by defining "apologist" as one who accepts the historicity of the Book of Mormon, and "critical scholar" as one who accepts a nineteenth-century origin for the book, is insisting that others accept his understanding of the Book of Mormon or be expelled from the elite community of "critical scholars" as it is defined in his idiosyncratic world view. Some are even intent on labeling rational discussion of these issues and critique of their positions as a form of "spiritual abuse," Furthermore, some recent publications and activities of Latter-day Saint dissenters are essentially a form of "spiritual blackmail," in which they demand that the Church accept their personal interpretations of Latter-day Saint history, practice, and doctrine as "the Truth," or risk being
publicly denounced to the media as liars, and compared with the Nazis and the holocaust, with totalitarian dictatorships, or Torquemada. A frequent protestation of many dissenters is that they are being persecuted only for telling “the Truth” about Mormonism, when in fact they are simply confusing their personal interpretations of the past with “the ultimate Truth,” which they are attempting to compel all members of the Church to recognize. Are we expected to believe that fallible human beings are capable of knowing “the Truth” about the past? This is fundamentally nothing less than an attempt by cultural Mormons to impose their world view and understanding of the past on the Church as a whole—the vast majority of whom are members of the Church precisely because they reject the dissenter’s version of “the Truth.”

Supposed Methodological Errors of the “Apologists”

Most of Metcalfe’s essay consists of a tendentious enumeration of supposed methodological errors which he claims derive from the faulty assumptions of the “apologists.” There are two major problems with his approach. First, some of his examples are in fact based on a serious misreading of the arguments and evidence of the historical traditionalists. Second, as noted above, he has not demonstrated that the errors he enumerates are in fact

51 Liars: Steven Benson’s charges against Dallin Oaks as reported in The Salt Lake Tribune on October 12, 16, and 17, and Paul Toscano’s general accusations in the Tribune, 20 October 1993. Nazis and the Holocaust: D. Michael Quinn, “On Being a Mormon Historian,” in Smith, ed., Faithful History, 94. Totalitarianism: Quinn, “On Being a Mormon Historian,” 94; Allen Roberts, “A Church Divided,” Private Eye Weekly, 10/20 (20 October 1993): 12c. Torquemada: Roberts, “A Church Divided,” 10c, where Roberts generously admits that Elder Packer “is a far cry from Torquemada.” I suspect that I could find several hundred villains of the past from whom Packer is also morally a “far cry.” So why mention Torquemada at all, if not to imply that Packer is on his way to parity with the great inquisitor? I await forthcoming reports of secret torture chambers in the Church office buildings, and burnings at the stake on Temple Square. The absurdity of this type of hyperbole is really quite extraordinary. Are we supposed to equate the petty squabbling of a handful of dissenters with the mass-torture and murder of millions of human beings? Are they so self-important that they equate their own emotional distress with the horrors of the Holocaust? Last time I checked I could find no cases of anyone being murdered, tortured, or imprisoned by the Church for heresy. This repulsive hyperbole reduces the cosmic evil of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes to a level of utter banality.
due to some specific failing of the “apologetic” world view. All scholars are human beings, and as such can make errors of evidence, method, and analysis. Such errors are not unique to any world view, paradigm, set of presuppositions, political persuasion, or religious belief. Metcalfe himself—the “critical scholar”—makes more than his share of errors. To the extent that any scholar makes errors, they should be corrected. But the fact that one believer might make such an error certainly provides no grounds for accusing all believers, in all their arguments, of lacking rigor and proper method. Metcalfe is thus attempting to make a generic methodological condemnation of historical traditional scholarship as a whole, on the basis of isolated and debatable individual errors from a few scholars.

In many cases Metcalfe seems to be arguing as follows:
1. Person A believes in the historicity of the Book of Mormon.
2. Person A makes unsound logical statements, and methodological errors.
3. Person B also believes in the historicity of the Book of Mormon.
4. Therefore, Person B is guilty of Person A’s faulty logic and method.

This is, of course, an example of the fallacy of the perfect analogy, which “consists in reasoning from a partial resemblance between two entities to an entire and exact correspondence. It is an erroneous inference from the fact that A and B are similar in some respects to the false conclusion that they are the same in all respects.”

Metcalfe’s thesis can be maintained only if he is able to demonstrate that the supposed errors are caused not by normal human fallibility, but by some inherent fallacy in the presuppositions of scholars. This he never does. Indeed, to justify his blanket condemnation of the methods and assumptions of the traditionalists, he provides only a few examples of the types of errors he claims universally plague the traditionalists.

The Question of Negative Proof

While it may be true that some traditionalists have fallen victim to the fallacy of negative proof, it is neither inherent in

52 Fischer, Historians’ Fallacies, 247.
believing, nor is it unique to believers. Secular naturalists are as guilty of the fallacy of negative proof as are believers. What examples does Metcalfe provide to support his universal condemnation of the traditionalists? In fact, only one.

"Apologists have asserted," he insists, "that Smith and contemporaries could not have known that some ancient peoples engraved on metallic plates" (p. 156). But is this so? Metcalfe's statement of the issue seems to be a misrepresentation. Metcalfe provides twelve sources which he cites as supporting his contention that "apologists have asserted that Smith and contemporaries could not have known that some ancient peoples engraved on metallic plates." In fact, most of the essays cited by Metcalfe do not argue that knowledge of writing on metals was completely unknown, but only that it was not widely known, and that it therefore would be unlikely for a young frontier farm-boy to have had access to this knowledge. Thus Metcalfe himself has transformed the reasonable argument of the traditionalists—knowledge of ancient writing on metal plates was not widely known—into a form of the fallacy of negative proof, "that Smith and contemporaries could not have known that some ancient peoples engraved on metallic plates." Thus it is only Metcalfe's reading of the argument which is fallacious, not the original argument of the historical traditionalists. I have added emphasis throughout the following quotations, which provide the actual statements found in the essays cited by Metcalfe:

1. Paul Cheesman: "This claim [that the Book of Mormon was written on metal plates] was considered by most to be purely nonsensical, not only because of disbelief concerning the ostensible source of these materials, but also because it did not happen to fall within the pale of current archaeological opinion." Cheesman is here arguing not that nineteenth-century scholars "could not have known" of writing on metal plates, as

53 Metcalfe himself indulges in it in his paper. To argue because no evidence of horses or swords has been found in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica (p. 161), that it is proven that there were no horses or swords, and therefore that the Book of Mormon is not an ancient document, is a classic argument from negative proof.

Metcalfe claims, but that it was widely considered “nonsensical.”

2. Paul Cheesman: “At the time of Joseph Smith’s remarkable discovery in 1830, there was probably no knowledge of writing amongst the [North] American Indians, or of any written on metal. In fact, it is evident that a knowledge of any ancient culture writing on metal, anywhere in the world, was not public knowledge at that time.” Again, Cheesman is not arguing that no one knew of writing on metals, but that American Indian writing on metal was “probably” unknown, and that other writing on metal plates was not widely known, and hence is not making the argument Metcalfe claims he does.

3. C. Wilfred Griggs: “The Book of Mormon deserves the same kind of test, especially in view of the tremendous amount of material relating to the ancient Near East which was recovered during the last century. Because such materials were unknown in the early nineteenth century, they provide a superb control with which to measure the Book of Mormon, for Joseph Smith obviously could not have had access to them in writing the book.” Specifically, the Orphic gold plate Griggs is discussing “was not published until 1836.” Although Griggs could have been clearer, his argument is different than the one Metcalfe claims he is making. Griggs focuses only on specific new archaeological discoveries which have occurred since the translation of the Book of Mormon and suggests that they are important because those specific texts and artifacts—such as the Orphic plate—were not known in Joseph’s day. Griggs does not argue that there was no knowledge of writing on metal plates, as Metcalfe claims.

4. Hugh Nibley: “But what we want to point out here is that the knowledge and use of metal plates for the keeping of important records is beginning to emerge as a general practice throughout the ancient world. It will not be long before men [here we might insert “such as Metcalfe”] forget that in Joseph Smith’s day the prophet was mocked and derided for his

description of the plates more than anything else.”57 Nibley is not claiming that knowledge of writing on metal was unknown in Joseph Smith’s day, only that it is much better documented and more widely known today, and that Joseph was mocked for his claim of writing on metal plates. Again this source does not assert what Metcalfe claims it argues.

5. Hugh Nibley: “The main obstacle to a fair and unbiased testing of the Book of Mormon in the past has been the story of the golden plates. Scholars have found it hard to be impartial or even serious in the face of such a tale.”58 Again, Nibley is only claiming that Joseph was mocked because of his claims of having golden plates—which is certainly true59—not that examples of writing on plates were unknown.

6. Hugh Nibley: “It is only too easy to forget that nothing in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon excited louder howls of derision than the fantastic idea of a sacred history being written on gold plates and then buried in the ground.”60

7. Hugh Nibley: “It is hard for us to realize today that for many years the idea of writing a sacred record on gold plates was considered just too funny for words and that the mere mention of the ‘Golden Bible’ was enough to shock and scandalize the world.”61

8. Hugh Nibley: “By now the discovery of writings on plates of precious metal, once the hardest thing to swallow in

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59 For example, see John Hyde, Jr., Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs (New York: Fetridge, 1857), 217–18. M. T. Lamb was “compelled to believe . . . that no such records were ever engraved upon golden plates, or any other plates, in the early ages” (The Golden Bible [New York: Ward & Drummond, 1887], 11). I would like to thank Matthew Roper for these references.


61 Ibid., 220.
Joseph Smith’s story, has become almost commonplace in the Near East.”

9. Hugh Nibley: “Nothing in the Book of Mormon itself has excited greater hilarity and derision than Joseph Smith’s report that the original record was engraved on gold plates, the account being condensed from much fuller records on bronze plates. . . . But it was anything but commonplace a hundred years ago, when the idea of sacred records being written on metal plates was thought just too funny for words.”

10. Hugh Nibley: “Joseph Smith’s insistence on books made of metal plates was a favorite target of his detractors; metal plates were strange enough to seem ludicrous, and impractical enough to cause difficulties. This was not the normal way of writing.” Nowhere in these quotations is Nibley claiming that there was no knowledge of writing on metal plates in Joseph’s day, as Metcalfe claims—only that such writing was considered “strange,” “impractical,” and “not normal.”

Only the final two sources make arguments which are close to those he claims are made by all of his “apologists,” but even here the sources are ambiguous.

11. Mark E. Peterson: “Until Moroni came, Joseph was not acquainted with gold or any other metallic plates on which ancient records were made. He had no idea that archaeologists would subsequently find such plates in a hundred different locations, from Java to Spain and from the Near East to Mexico.”

Although the first sentence of this argument is indeed a form of the fallacy of negative proof—there is no way to know for sure what Joseph himself did or did not know—the passage as a whole is not asserting the universal ignorance which Metcalfe imputes to it.

12. Kirk Holland Vestal and Arthur Wallace: “When the Book of Mormon went on sale in A.D. 1830, there were no

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63 Ibid., 245.

64 Ibid., 385.

65 Most contemporary historical traditionalist scholars of the Book of Mormon would not consider Peterson’s work to be “scholarly.” Vestal and Wallace’s work is of better quality, but neither was a professional scholar of antiquity.

66 Mark E. Petersen, Those Gold Plates! (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1979), 61.
records on metal plates known in the Western World; the Book of Mormon was derided as the ‘Golden Bible,’ because it claimed to have been translated from written plates of golden metal.” 67 If by “Western World” Vestal and Wallace have reference to Western civilization including Europe and North America, then they are indeed making a false claim. It is possible, however, that they are referring to the western hemisphere, in which case their argument is sound.

I will admit that there are Latter-day Saint amateur historians and scriptionists who are uninformed and careless in their writings. Furthermore, even trained and usually careful scholars can make mistakes, or phrase arguments ambiguously. But to prove his point that the assumptions of the “apologists” inherently cause methodological errors, it is insufficient for Metcalfe to demonstrate that some uninformed believers in the antiquity of the Book of Mormon have made occasional errors of evidence or analysis. Historical traditionalists have long recognized this, and have repeatedly condemned it. 68 Instead, Metcalfe distorts the claims of the careful and professional historical traditionalists in an attempt to create a universal methodological error which in fact is found only in some traditionalist writings. He is attempting to imply guilt by association: if any “apologist” makes a bad argument, then all “apologists” are responsible and methodologically tainted.

Writing on Metal Plates in Jahn’s Biblical Archaeology?

Having claimed—but failed to prove—that “apologists have asserted that Smith and contemporaries could not have known that some ancient peoples engraved on metallic plates” (p. 156), Metcalfe insists that writing on metal was indeed known in Joseph’s day—a proposition which professional historical traditionalists never denied.

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It is therefore not surprising that Metcalfe demonstrates that knowledge of ancient writing on bronze plates was available in early nineteenth-century North America by citing a passage from *Jahn's Biblical Archaeology*, published in the United States in 1823 (p. 157). Unfortunately, however, he attempts to take this identification a step further, by asserting that writing on *golden* plates was also known. Metcalfe tells us that “based on *Josephus* and *Pliny*, Jahn speculated that ancient ‘Hebrews went so far as to write their sacred books in gold.’ This echoes Nephi’s injunction that religious rather than secular history should be recorded on plates presumably made of gold” (p. 157). This claim of a significant parallel between Jahn’s description of writing “in gold” and the Book of Mormon writing on plates of gold is another case of distortion of the evidence. In fact, the passage from Jahn is clearly describing the use of gold *ink*, not writing on plates of golden *metal*! The entire passage from Jahn reads:

_Ink, called *deyo*, is spoken of in Num. 5:23, as well known and common, comp. Jer. 36:18, and was prepared in various ways, which are related by Pliny, XVI. 6 XXX. 25. The most simple, and consequently the most ancient method of preparation, was a mixture of water with coals broken to pieces, or with soot, with an addition of gum. The ancients used other tinctures also; particularly, if we may credit Cicero de Nat. Deor. II. 20. and Persius III. 11, the ink extracted from the cuttle fish, *tekelet*, although their assertion is in opposition to Pliny. The Hebrews went so far as to write their sacred books in gold, as we may learn from Josephus, Antiqu. XII. 2,11. compared with Pliny XXXIII. 40.*

How this could possibly be seen by Metcalfe as a source for the idea of writing on golden plates is remarkable.  

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70 Citing *Jahn’s Biblical Archaeology*, 95. The emphasis on Josephus and Pliny is Metcalfe’s; since Josephus and Pliny are ancient authors rather than books, it is unclear why Metcalfe and the editors of Dialogue have put their names in italics.
71 *Jahn’s Biblical Archaeology*, 95.
72 To me this misreading raises a serious question of the possibility of an intentional attempt at deception. I asked Metcalfe about the rationale.
Metcalfe seems to realize that the fact that some highly educated scholars in the early nineteenth century were aware of ancient writing on metal plates is not evidence that it would have been common knowledge among semiliterate frontier farm-boys. He therefore attempts to devise some sort of causal link between Joseph Smith and Jahn. Metcalfe demonstrates that "paraphrased excerpts from Jahn’s Biblical Archaeology appeared in early Book of Mormon apologia" (p. 157). But the fact that this work was indeed known to the educated professional journalist W. W. Phelps in 1833 is certainly not conclusive evidence that it was known to Joseph Smith in 1829. Furthermore, neither Campbell nor other anti-Mormons ever criticized Joseph for plagiarizing from Jahn. Metcalfe also fails to inform his readers that the volume was apparently not in the Manchester public library.

Metcalfe concludes, "whether Smith knew of Jahn’s publication, the idea that ancients inscribed on metal plates was available in Smith’s culture" (p. 157). Indeed, but no reputable historical traditionalist scholar has ever claimed otherwise. The claim is that such knowledge was essentially limited to highly educated specialists, as demonstrated by attacks on Joseph’s claim that the Book of Mormon was written on metal plates. But even if one were to grant that Joseph had read Jahn’s book or heard about the ideas second-hand, it still would not demon-

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for his claim in a letter which remained unanswered. It is also possible that Metcalfe did not in fact read the material himself, but is relying on second-hand summaries, but this would hardly pass for the rigorous critical method which he so lauds.

73 Citing Evening and Morning Star 1 (January 1833): 8. Metcalfe’s citation of an 1842 article in Times and Seasons (157 n. 17) is basically irrelevant to Joseph’s state of knowledge in 1829, since Joseph would have been made aware of the book by Phelps’s 1833 article. It is interesting to note that Dan Vogel earlier noticed the so-called comparisons between Jahn and the golden plates (Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986], 80 n. 47), which Metcalfe fails to acknowledge.

74 Robert Paul, “Joseph Smith and the Manchester (New York) Library,” BYU Studies 22/3 (Summer 1982): 333–56. I am not claiming that because a source was not available in the Manchester library it was therefore not available at all to Joseph Smith; I am only arguing for a relative inaccessibility of the source.

75 See sources mentioned in n. 59 above.
strate that the story of the golden plates and angelic visitations was a fabrication.

The standard environmentalist argument that because someone, somewhere, during Joseph’s lifetime knew a particular fact, therefore Joseph Smith could have known it, seems to me to be silly. A number of educated people in the early nineteenth-century United States read Latin—does this demonstrate that Joseph Smith did? Some people of Joseph Smith’s day could build steam engines—should we therefore assume that Joseph could? The burden of proof for the naturalists is to demonstrate what Joseph knew, not what was known by someone else during Joseph’s lifetime. This type of argumentation is a classic example of the “fallacy of the possible proof [which] consists in an attempt to demonstrate that a factual statement is true or false by establishing the possibility of its truth or falsity.”

Early Latter-day Saint Views of Book of Mormon Geography

Metcalfe next turns to a favorite theme: that “Joseph Smith and contemporaries believed the Book of Mormon pertained to large stretches of North, Central, and South America and to all native American peoples” (p. 158), and that therefore “Sorenson’s and Palmer’s [limited geography] theories contradict Joseph Smith’s own pronouncements on the Book of Mormon” (p. 160). Metcalfe insists that “it is unclear how Book of Mormon geographers discriminate between Smith’s inspired text and his inspired interpretations” (p. 161). If these matters are unclear to Metcalfe, it can only be because he has failed to read or understand the published discussions which clearly answer his questions.

But let me try to clarify these matters for Metcalfe’s benefit. His argument here is again based on another fallacy—this time the “fallacy of the circular proof [which] is a species of

76 Fischer, Historians’ Fallacies, 53.
question-begging, which consists in assuming what is to be proved.”78 Specifically, in this instance, Metcalfe assumes that, since Joseph is in fact the author of the Book of Mormon, his personal opinions are as definitive for Book of Mormon geography as are J. R. R. Tolkien’s views on the imaginary geography of Middle Earth. But if we are to assume, for the sake of argument, that Joseph translated the Book of Mormon, then it is quite possible that he did not have specific knowledge of ancient Book of Mormon geography.

Metcalfe is here proposing a methodology for analyzing Book of Mormon geography in which the statements not only of Joseph Smith, but of all other early Latter-day Saint writers, are given equal authority with the text of the Book of Mormon itself (pp. 158–61, 184). Thus Metcalfe begins with the presupposition that the macrogeography of the Book of Mormon must be hemispheric, because the geographical interpretations of many of the early Saints were hemispheric. Metcalfe’s methodology is valid only on the presupposition that either: (1) Joseph himself wrote the book (which is, of course, precisely Metcalfe’s presupposition), or (2) Joseph’s personal interpretations were all inspired and inerrant (which is a position which Metcalfe attempts to force upon those who accept the authenticity of the book).

My position is that Joseph is a secondary source in relation to Book of Mormon geography, just as the translator of any ancient document is a secondary source. The primary source is always only the ancient document itself or other contemporary ancient records. It is sound historical methodology to analyze primary sources independently of any secondary interpretations. If we assume that Joseph Smith was the translator rather than the author of the Book of Mormon, then his statements on Book of Mormon geography may be merely his personal opinion. They are not necessarily either definitive, nor authoritative.

One could ask, does my position not beg the question just as much as Metcalfe’s? Not at all. In order to determine the relationship between Joseph’s interpretations of Book of Mormon geography and the geography described in the Book of Mormon itself, it is methodologically imperative that we first analyze the two sets of data independently. Thereafter, they can be compared and contrasted. If they show similarities on all levels, then

78 Fischer, Historians’ Fallacies, 49.
an argument could be made either for Joseph as author of the text, or for Joseph as having extraordinary knowledge of the ancient geography. But, if there arise significant disjunctures between the geography of the text itself, and Joseph's statements about the geography of the text, then we could argue that Joseph was not the author of the text and that his geographical statements represent his personal interpretations. At any rate, the first step is clearly to analyze the two sets of data independently. If we attempt to conflate the two from the outset of the analysis—as Metcalfe does—we will never be able to analyze the relationship between the two sets of data accurately.

Thus, while I can concede that most early Latter-day Saints believed in a hemispheric geography, this fact does not make that interpretation authoritative. Furthermore, contrary to Metcalfe's implications, I am not a revelatory inerrantist. Joseph was a prophet, who saw God and resurrected beings, had revelations, and translated ancient books by the power of God. But this does not imply that Joseph's opinions were therefore all inspired, infallible, or even equally authoritative.

Does the fact that Joseph translated the Book of Mormon by the power of God, conversed with resurrected Nephites, and had visions of Nephite antiquity necessarily provide him with an infallible, or even an accurate knowledge of ancient Nephite geography? This is related to a larger question: does a revelation about a subject necessarily provide the recipient of that revelation with a complete and infallible knowledge of all particulars associated with the revelation? For Joseph this was certainly not the case, as the following passage from the Doctrine and Covenants indicates:

I was once praying very earnestly to know the time of the coming of the Son of Man, when I heard a voice repeat the following: Joseph, my son, if thou livest until thou art eighty-five years old, thou shalt see the face of the Son of Man; therefore let this suffice, and trouble me no more on this matter. I was left thus, without being able to decide whether this coming referred to the beginning of the millennium or to some previous appearing, or
whether I should die and thus see his face. (D&C 130:14–16)79

If Joseph could remain uncertain concerning the specific implications of this revelation, why should we assume that his translating the Book of Mormon would provide him with an accurate knowledge of Nephite geography? I would argue that translating an ancient document—by divine or human power—does not necessarily guarantee that the translator will thereby have an accurate knowledge of the ancient geography he is reading about. I have translated a number of ancient and medieval documents, and I am often at a complete loss as to the geographical location of many of the place names mentioned in the text. Likewise, talking with resurrected Nephites would not guarantee that Joseph would have an accurate knowledge of Nephite geography any more than a conversation with a Tibetan would provide one with a knowledge of the geography of Tibet. Why should a vision of ancient history guarantee that the visionary will have an accurate knowledge of the ancient geography he is seeing, and be able to correlate it with modern geography, any more than seeing a movie about Tibet would allow one to accurately identify all the places he had seen in the movie? Thus, despite Joseph’s prophetic role in translating the Book of Mormon, he nonetheless remains a secondary source for Nephite geography.

The basic methodology followed by historical traditionalists in reconstructing Book of Mormon geography is as follows:

1. Carefully study the text of the Book of Mormon, identifying all passages of any geographic significance.
2. Categorize these toponyms according to type (cities, lands, hills, rivers, seas, etc.).
3. Analyze the relationships between various passages for consistency or inconsistency.
4. Identify any type of geographical links described between the toponyms (travel times, directions, spatial relationships, etc.).

79 A similar incident can be found in the Book of Mormon where Lehi did not observe all the elements of the vision of the tree of life which Nephi observed (1 Nephi 15:27, referring to 8:13 and 12:16).
5. If these geographic statements are internally consistent, develop an internal ideal model of Book of Mormon geography.80

6. Apply this internally consistent hypothetical model to various potential real world settings in an attempt to formulate possible correlations.

7. Compare the various models of real world correspondences in order to determine which, if any, forms the best correlation.

Metcalfe and other naturalists skip steps one through five, insisting that only the early nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint model can be used in attempting to discover possible real-world correlations with Book of Mormon geography. However, when this full methodology is followed we discover, first, that Book of Mormon internal geography is remarkably consistent, and second, that it is consistently limited—that all known geographical distances (travel times) point to a macrogeographical zone of only a few hundred miles. To my knowledge, no critic of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon has ever successfully disputed these two conclusions based on evidence from the text itself. The remarkable result of this process is that there is a significant disjuncture between early Latter-day Saint interpretations of Book of Mormon geography, and the geography of the text itself. This would lead one to conclude that, if Joseph Smith believed in a hemispheric Book of Mormon geography, he was not the author of the text.81

Lamanites

Metcalfe offers a variation on this argument by claiming that the intended geography of the Book of Mormon must be hemispheric because early Saints believed the North American Indians were Lamanites (p. 160). Although the early Saints may have believed this, Metcalfe’s argument is invalid for precisely the same reasons given above: the text of the Book of Mormon itself does not necessarily make this claim. Furthermore, Metcalfe is here also confusing genetic and cultural bases for

80 For an excellent example of steps one through five, see Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies.”
ethnicity and tribalism. Most modern people who are unfamiliar with ancient sources and anthropological studies naturally conclude that tribalism described in ancient sources was exclusively genetic. In fact, the basis of tribalism in antiquity was invariably fundamentally political, religious, and cultural rather than genetic. There was certainly a strong genetic component to ancient ethnicity, both because the usual way for one to enter into a political or cultural tribal unit was through birth, and because genealogies—real or fictitious—were widely used as mechanisms for developing group solidarity and legitimacy. Nonetheless, genetic bonds in a tribal group were ultimately of secondary importance, since inclusion in the group could come through alliance, covenant, conquest, enslavement, conversion, marriage, or adoption. The fact that Metcalfe—along with many early and modern Latter-day Saints—misunderstands the fundamental nature of tribalism in antiquity is all the more remarkable since the Book of Mormon clearly presents an authentic ancient view of tribalism.82

The differences between Lamanites and Nephites are fundamentally political, religious, and cultural, not ethnic. This is made clear in the following passage:

There were no robbers, nor murders, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God. . . . [later] a small part of the people who had revolted from the church and taken upon them the name of Lamanites; therefore there began to be Lamanites again in the land. (4 Nephi 1:17, 20)83

*Lamanite* is not a genetic designator requiring us to insist that all inhabitants of the New World are genetically descended *only* from the Lehiite colony; it is a cultural designator. It does not necessarily imply genetic descent from a single ancestor, it implies being culturally non-Nephite. Thus, in the fundamental Book of Mormon sense, to declare that the American Indians

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83 From an ancient tribal perspective, the phrase “children of Christ” could be translated “bene ha-meshiach,” or the “tribe of the Messiah (Christ),” just as Nephites probably translates “bene nephi,” and Lamanite “bene Laman.”
were all Lamanites is to declare that they are all non-Nephites. In this original sense of the Nephite-Lamanite dichotomy, all modern Native Americans can be accurately described as cultural or political Lamanites, since they are non-Nephites.

Finally, the early Latter-day Saint belief that the Lamanites were the ancestors of the American Indians does not in fact contradict the limited geography theory. Many North American Indians may have some type of real genetic link to Lamanites, even if the setting of the Book of Mormon was limited to Mesoamerica. I, for example, am a descendant of the Saxons, but this does not mean that I live in Saxony in northern Germany, worship Odin, and enjoy marauding on the coast of England in wooden boats like my ancestors did. It is quite possible that, during the nearly millennium and a half between the fall of the Nephites and the translation of the Book of Mormon, the genetic material of the Lamanites spread throughout much of the New World through migration, trade, conquest, intermarriage, or slavery. At any rate, there is no fatal inconsistency here for the limited geography theory.

The Question of Cumorah

Metcalfe attempts to demonstrate that there is a "pennchant among some traditionalist and critical scholars of Mormon scripture to exaggerate evidentiary conclusions by claiming to have discovered the first appearance of some historical tidbit" (p. 159 n. 20). Since Metcalfe admits that this type of error is not unique to his so-called "apologists," it is clear that this problem cannot be caused by unique fallacies in the assumptions of the "apologists." So why is it included in his discussion of supposed "apologetic" methodological errors at all? Metcalfe has collected a hodgepodge of criticisms of the works of others. He has combined them in an article purporting to critique the assumptions and methods of those with whom he disagrees, even though many of his criticisms have nothing to do with supposedly "apologetic" methodologies, nor even with the Book of Mormon.

Metcalfe provides only one substantive example of this "pennchant." He points out that I claimed that the earliest explicit correlation of New York Cumorah with Book of Mormon Cumorah "comes not from Joseph Smith, but Oliver Cowdery"
Metcalfe demonstrates that I was wrong, and that an earlier identification comes from W. W. Phelps in January 1833 (p. 160). This is indeed a useful piece of data, which I will discuss below.

However, Metcalfe makes a serious error. He claims that “Hamblin’s contention... is negated by the fact that the recipient of Cowdery’s letter, W. W. Phelps, had editorialized [about Cumorah] eighteen months earlier in 1833 as if it were common knowledge” (p. 160). In fact, this earlier evidence from Phelps does not “negate” my fundamental point. The foundation of my contention is not that Oliver Cowdery in particular was the first to identify the Hill Cumorah with the hill in New York, but that Joseph Smith was not the first. If it was Phelps in 1833 (or anyone else, for that matter) who first made the identification instead of Cowdery in 1835, my contention still stands, because it was not Joseph Smith who first clearly linked the two sites.

Metcalfe then reports that “my indication to Hamblin (Metcalfe to Hamblin, 18 Apr. 1993) that in 1834 Wilford Woodruff attributed to Joseph Smith the phrase ‘known from the hill Camorah [sic] <or east sea> to the Rocky Mountains’ evidently persuaded him that Smith at least implicitly made the correlation before Cowdery” (p. 160 n. 21). In fact, I am not at all persuaded that “Smith at least implicitly made the correlation before Cowdery.” Furthermore, since Metcalfe has kindly provided us with an 1833 reference correlating the Hill Cumorah with the New York hill, Phelps in 1833, rather than Joseph, is the most likely source for Woodruff’s identification.

My position on the Woodruff citation was, and remains, that the term Cumorah in the text is Woodruff’s, not Joseph Smith’s. My rationale for this claim is that Woodruff’s statement about Joseph mentioning Cumorah in the Zelph incident is unique among the six near-contemporary accounts, indicating that Joseph himself probably did not use the term, which was,
rather, an interpolation of Woodruff. The question thus becomes, did Joseph himself originally use the word Cumorah as recorded by Woodruff’s “known from the hill Camorah [sic] <or east sea> to the Rocky Mountains,” or did he say “known from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains,” as recorded by McBride? None of the other accounts mentions either the Hill Cumorah or the Atlantic Ocean. Woodruff himself shows ambiguity on this point by inserting the phrase “or east sea” in his text. If Joseph had used the word Cumorah, we would expect it to appear in more of the early accounts of the incident. That the word Cumorah does not appear in other accounts demonstrates that the reference to Cumorah is probably Woodruff’s interpretation of what Joseph was saying, but not Joseph’s actual word.

But all of this is quibbling. I will admit that it is possible that the identification of the Hill Cumorah with the hill in New York may have come from Joseph Smith. However, that position is not proven because of the following evidence, for which the theory that Joseph himself conceived of the identification cannot account:

1. The Book of Mormon itself specifically states that the golden plates of the Book of Mormon were not buried in Cumorah (Mormon 6:6). If Joseph is the author of the Book of Mormon, and wished to make this identification, why did he state the opposite in his text? Assuming Joseph was the author of the Book of Mormon, this would indicate, at the very least, that he had not made the correlation in his own mind by the summer of 1829. What caused Joseph later to decide to make this correlation?

2. The Book of Mormon strongly implies that the Hill Cumorah is near the narrow neck of land (Mormon 4–6, Ether 14). If Joseph were inventing the text, and already had in mind a hemispheric geography and an identification of the hill in New York with the ancient Cumorah as Metcalfe maintains, why

88 I refer to Joseph Smith’s letter, and the journals of Reuben McBride, Moses Martin, Wilford Woodruff, Levi Hancock, and Heber C. Kimball. See Kenneth W. Godfrey, “The Zelph Story,” F.A.R.M.S. paper, 1989. An abridged version of this essay can be found in BYU Studies 29/2 (1989): 32–56. I will cite from the F.A.R.M.S. edition. Metcalfe claims to have found some additional early accounts of the Zelph incident. Unfortunately, he has neither published the accounts nor provided the references.

did he place the hill Cumorah near the isthmus of Panama—the narrow neck of the hemispheric model?

3. Joseph never identifies the hill in which he found the plates as the hill Cumorah. Indeed, even after that identification became commonplace, Joseph simply calls it “a hill of considerable size,” which was “convenient to the village of Manchester” (Joseph Smith—History 1:51).\(^\text{90}\)

If I were convinced that the evidence supported Joseph as the author of the identification of the New York hill with the Book of Mormon Cumorah I would not hesitate to accept it. It ultimately makes no difference to the limited geography model, because it would not change the possibility that the identification was Joseph’s personal interpretation. But whether one believes that Joseph translated an ancient book or fabricated a fantasy tale, the evidence seems to indicate that Joseph did not originally have the identification of the ancient Nephite Cumorah with the hill in New York in mind. This seems to come as an afterthought, deriving either from Joseph himself in personal conversation (as Metcalfe maintains), from W. W. Phelps, or from some other unidentified source.

Specifically, I am arguing that it is possible, and indeed probable, that Joseph was influenced by the geographical speculations of Phelps, Cowdery, and others in their identification of the Hill Cumorah as the hill in New York where the plates were found. Why is this perfectly reasonable interpretation—which accounts for all of the data from either an ancient or a nineteenth-century perspective—so abhorrent to Metcalfe? I believe that it is because Metcalfe wishes to use the New York Cumorah as a bludgeon against those who accept the antiquity of the Book of Mormon and a limited geographical view. Here we have a bizarre case of the arch-environmentalist Metcalfe, who sees nearly every thought of Joseph Smith as environmentally conditioned, denying the possibility that Joseph borrowed ideas about Book of Mormon geography from his Latter-day Saint contem-

\(^{90}\) Dean C. Jessee, ed., The Papers of Joseph Smith, 2 vols. to date (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–), 1:281. According to Jessee’s note to this passage, the phrase in question was added later at the request of James Mulholland in order to clarify “the location of the place where the box was deposited” (1:281 n. 1). This would have been a perfect opportunity for Joseph to insert some reference to Cumorah if he had felt it were important, but he did not do so.
poraries, the people with whom Joseph would have had more contact and interchange of ideas than any others.

Metcalfe’s refusal to consider the possibility that Joseph derived some of his ideas on Book of Mormon geography from his Latter-day Saint contemporaries is all the more strange when we examine his other (frequently implausible) attempts to find nineteenth-century parallels to Joseph’s ideas. For example, Metcalfe and Dan Vogel would have us believe that Joseph’s cosmology is somehow related to ideas found in Benjamin Franklin’s private unpublished papers of 1728, composed a century before Joseph wrote.91

Going a step further, they seem to maintain that Joseph may have had a predilection for reading Kant in the original German. “Immanuel Kant claimed that the moral perfection of each planet’s inhabitants increased ‘according to the proportion of [its] distance from the sun.’ Certainly in such an intellectual climate, Joseph Smith's ideas about pluralism and astronomical hierarchy were not unusual.”92 The passage they cite as illustrative of Joseph’s “intellectual climate” is from Kant’s 1755 work, Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels, oder Versuch von der Verfassung und dem mechanischen Ursprunge des ganzen Weltgebäudes nach Newtonischen Grundsätzen abgehandelt. But their choice of a work to illustrate Joseph’s “intellectual climate” is particularly unfortunate. “The book’s publisher . . . went bankrupt just at the time Kant’s work was to have been published. His stock was impounded, and as a result copies of the book were for a long time simply unavailable.”93 Even after being reprinted, “like some other memorable cases of books that came ‘stillborn from the press,’ Kant’s [work] . . . was virtually unknown in its own day; indeed, it had to wait for more than a century [i.e., until after 1855] for its true greatness to be appreciated.”94 For example, “In England, Herschel [1738–1822, a native German living in England, and the greatest

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91 Vogel and Metcalfe, “Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Cosmology,” in The Word of God, 217 n. 68. It must be emphasized, furthermore, that, in terms of his religious thought, Franklin was not a representative figure of his times.
92 Ibid., 207.
94 Ibid., viii.
astronomer of his day], for all his ties with Hannover, did not learn about Kant’s cosmology.”95 The work was first translated into English in 1900, nearly six decades after Joseph Smith’s death.96

Vogel and Metcalfe’s argument that Kant’s work was somehow part of the “intellectual climate” of early nineteenth-century frontier New York is laughable, and is perhaps the most patently absurd of the many environmentalist claims which I have read. I can just imagine the sturdy country yeomen of the Palmyra region gathering in a local tavern for their weekly discussions of the “categorical imperative” over a tankard of ale. Meanwhile, they spend their free moments between milking the cows, splitting rails, and plowing, in brushing up on their philosophical German so they can devour the latest of Kant’s untranslated works late at night by candlelight. It seems to me that Metcalfe will go to absurd lengths to find the most obscure possible parallels between Joseph and his environment in order to undermine the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. But Joseph cannot have been influenced by the ideas of his closest associates if such influence might seem to lend support to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

Swords in Mesoamerica?

Metcalfe is disturbed by the identification of the Mesoamerican macuahuitl as a sword. He insists that I “propose that since there is no conclusive evidence in ancient Mesoamerica for conventional swords, the Book of Mormon ‘sword’ is a wooden club with obsidian protruding from the sides, called in Nahuatl ‘macuahuitl’ . . . such flexible interpretations suggest a lack of methodological rigor on the part of those already certain of the Book of Mormon’s ancient historicity” (p. 161 n. 27).97

96 Ibid., 1–2.
97 Metcalfe’s description of the macuahuitl as “a wooden club with obsidian protruding form the sides” is misleading. It is not a randomly spiked or studded weapon as Metcalfe implies, but an edged weapon. A groove is carved in a long flat piece of wood on one or both sides; pieces of sharpened obsidian were placed side by side in the groove so that it formed a two to three foot long cutting edge. It was quite clearly a cutting rather than a smashing weapon, and thus is best described as a sword (cutting or thrust-
This is all very odd. Nearly all colonial Spaniards called the *macuañuitl* a sword.\(^{98}\) For example, Antonio de Solís y Rivadeneyra relates that the Aztecs had “long Swords, which they used with both Hands, as we do our Scimitars or Falchions, made of Wood, in which they had fixed sharp Flints. The strongest of them had Clubs, pointed with Flints.”\(^{99}\) Since Metcalfe has informed us that the *macuañuitl* is not a sword but only a club, what are we to make of this passage where Solís y Rivadeneyra distinguishes between the Aztec *macuañuitl* sword and another weapon which he specifically called a studded club in contrast to the sword? Likewise, the Anonymous Chronicler—who, unlike Metcalfe, actually saw Aztecs using their weapons in battle—tells us that “they [the Aztecs] have swords of this kind—of wood made like a two-handed sword, but with the hilt not so long, about three fingers in breadth. The edges are grooved, and in the grooves they insert stone knives, that cut like a Toledo knife.”\(^{100}\) Whose interpretation are we to accept? Metcalfe’s, or that of eyewitness conquistadors who actually fought with swords professionally and on a regular basis?

Is Metcalfe’s denunciation of my “lack of methodological rigor” supported by modern scholars in the field? Quite the contrary. I am in agreement, for example, with Ross Hassig, one of the world’s leading experts on Mesoamerican warfare. Not only

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\(^{100}\) Cited by Coe, “Pre-Conquest America,” 221.
does Hassig consistently call the macuahuitl a sword, but he clearly distinguishes it from the Aztec war club. "Clubs of various types were also used in Mesoamerican warfare. Some were made of wood alone, but others (huitzauhqui) had stone blades." Thus, not only in modern scholarly analysis, but in ancient technical military terminology, the Aztec macuahuitl sword is clearly distinguished from the huitzauhqui studded war club.

Metcalfe’s argument is not only contrary to the ancient evidence and modern academic interpretations, but is also an example of the "fallacy of semantical questions [which] consists in an attempt to resolve, by empirical investigation of an object, a semantical question about the name by which that object is called, thereby confusing actual happenings with verbal descriptions of actual happenings." Metcalfe seems to think, simply because the Mesoamerican macuahuitl sword is different from swords he has seen in the movies, that it is therefore not a sword at all.

Here it is worth raising the following hypothetical situation: Suppose that we were to discover a "conventional sword" (whatever that might be) in Mesoamerica. Would this be sufficient to convince Metcalfe of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon? I very much doubt it. Indeed, I cannot imagine the discovery of any archaeological evidence which would convince Metcalfe of the book’s antiquity. If there remained not a single archaeological question concerning the Book of Mormon—and there is no ancient book which is not plagued by historical and archaeological questions—I doubt that Metcalfe would accept the book. Even if an inscription were discovered in situ by a non-Mormon archaeologist mentioning the name Nephi, Metcalfe would still likely argue that it is simply coincidental.

This is apparent from the reaction of the naturalists to the discovery of numerous authentic Near Eastern names in Joseph’s restorations of ancient books. Most recently, Edward Ashment has argued that the name Abraham associated with a lion-couch scene in Egyptian magical papyri is not really

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101 Ross Hassig, Aztec Warfare: 83–85. See also his War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), where various Mesoamerican weapons, including the macuahuitl, are consistently called swords.

102 Hassig, Aztec Warfare, 85.

103 Fischer, Historians' Fallacies, 21.
Abraham at all, but simply a “magical word.” Ashment feels that Abraham is merely a variation on the name Abrasax. Although the historical implications of the presence of the name Abraham in association with a lion-couch scene reminiscent of Facsimile One in Egyptian magical papyri can certainly be debated, the fact that the biblical name Abraham occurs in the papyri is accepted by every scholar working in the field—except Edward H. Ashment. Ashment also objects to the identification of the name Nephi in ancient sources because it was anciently pronounced differently than early Mormons may have pronounced the name (p. 360 n. 38). As far as I know, the discovery of the name Alma as an authentic nonbiblical male Jewish name and the identification of the meaning of the name Mosiah have been ignored by the critics. Furthermore, the critics have never explained why we find close linguistic and literary parallels between the figure Mahujah in Dead Sea Scrolls Aramaic fragments of the Book of Enoch and Mahijah question-

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105 Ibid. Ashment appears to be a follower of the Moses-Middlebury school of philology, the primary tenet of which is that Moses and Middlebury are actually the same ancient name: you just drop the “-oses” and add the “-iddlebury.” Ashment would likewise have us drop the “-ham” and add the “-sax.” Ashment’s interpretation has some difficulty in explaining the references in the magical papyri to the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Ashment, 12); perhaps Ashment will next be arguing for the ancient worship of the “God of Abrasax, Isaac, and Jacob.”
106 Remarkably, after pages of desperate rationalization in an attempt to show that the name Abraham is not really Abraham, Ashment has the chutzpah to conclude by accusing the “apologists” of “ignoring evidence,” while failing to show us just what evidence is supposed to have been ignored (Ashment, 23). While it is certainly true that we interpret the evidence differently than Ashment, it is clear who is ignoring the evidence that he cannot fit into his world view.
107 Ashment fails to inform us how he is certain what the earliest pronunciation of Nephi was, or why such a pronunciation should be considered any more definitive than the early nineteenth-century pronunciation of Isaiah for the Hebrew Yesheyahu.
ing Enoch in the book of Moses (Moses 6:40). Why did Joseph Smith place Abraham near Olishem (Abraham 1:10), a place whose name has now been identified in ancient sources? For the critics, the existence of these authentic non-biblical ancient Near Eastern names in texts Joseph claimed derived from the ancient Near East must be attributed to random chance. Utilizing such a “rigorous methodology” as this, it is clear that the critics can dismiss any evidence which contradicts their presuppositions.

This raises an important methodological issue. Critics of the Book of Mormon consistently attack what they see as the weakest arguments and parallels drawn by the historical traditionalists, while failing to acknowledge, let alone to refute, the vast array of remarkable parallels to antiquity. They assume that, if they can demonstrate an error or two on particular points of evidence or analysis, the entire enterprise of the traditionalists has been undermined. In fact, proper methodological rigor requires them to explain not the weakest evidence, parallels, and analysis, but the strongest. Although the critics certainly have disputed some points, for the most part the strongest analysis and evidence of the traditionalists remain unanswered.

Thus the debate surrounding the Book of Mormon provides an excellent example of the power of assumptions to shape our views of the world in which we live. Metcalfe’s assumption is that there is no God. Thus, the Book of Mormon is inherently unacceptable because it contradicts everything he believes about the nature of the universe. The fundamental problem is not that


111 Tony Hutchinson, for example, dismisses Nibley’s entire corpus by a critique of his philological speculations on one single word (“The Word of God Is Enough,” 8–10). “The parallel method,” Hutchinson concludes, “is defective and should be recognized as such” (p. 10). If this is so, one wonders why parallels to nineteenth-century ideas are so widely accepted as proof of the Book of Mormon’s nineteenth-century origins by naturalists. Parallels, whether ancient or modern, should certainly not be seen as proof of the origin of the Book of Mormon, but they cannot be ignored or dismissed as evidence.
calling a *macuahuitl* a sword does not fit into Metcalfe's world view, but that *God* does not fit into Metcalfe's world view.

**The Journey to the Red Sea**

Metcalfe's next section contains a discussion of supposed problems with the Book of Mormon, where the existence of literary motifs is alleged to undermine historicity. Metcalfe asserts that "in the sole Book of Mormon passage where specific points of departure (Jerusalem) and arrival (the Red Sea) are identifiable with any degree of certainty (1 Nephi 2:4–7), the length of the journey (three days) seems to depend on a literary motif from Exodus" (p. 161). For Metcalfe this is strengthened by "the unlikelihood of Lehi's party traveling the approximately 180-mile stretch between Jerusalem and the Gulf of Aqaba so rapidly" (p. 162 n. 29).

Several points need to be made here. Although Metcalfe's reading is plausible, it is certainly not the only, nor the best possible reading. The geographically relevant parts of the text read (with emphasis added):

4 And it came to pass that he [Lehi] departed into the wilderness. . . . 5 And he came down by the borders near the shore of the Red Sea; and he traveled in the wilderness in the borders which are nearer the Red Sea . . . 6 And it came to pass that when he had traveled three days in the wilderness, he pitched his tent. (1 Nephi 2:4–7)

Note what the text does and does not say. First, there is a departure into the wilderness, and secondly, there is a journey of three days in the wilderness. In the tightest reading of the text the three-day travel time does not refer to the entire trip from Jerusalem, but only to the length of the journey "in the wilderness." Secondly, Lehi "traveled in the wilderness in the borders which are nearer the Red Sea." The borders of what? Clearly not the borders of the Red Sea itself, since one border of the Red Sea cannot be "nearer" the Red Sea than another. Rather, as I read the text, the "borders" refer to the borders of Judea.

Thus, a reasonable way to read the text is that Lehi traveled to the borders of Judea near the Red Sea, which in the early sixth century would have been in the region of Arad, Aroer, or
Tamar. From thence he “traveled three days in the wilderness,” probably referring to the biblical wilderness of Paran. Note that the travel time of three days is all “in the wilderness.” It is not the complete travel time from Jerusalem; at least the trip from Jerusalem to Arad would not be “in the wilderness.” Under this interpretation the distance traveled in the wilderness was thus not Metcalfe’s complete 180 miles from Jerusalem to Ezion-geber (modern Elat) at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, but 130–40 miles from the region of Arad or Aroer to Ezion-geber, possibly down the ancient route called the Ascent of Akkabbim, and then on the “Way to the Red Sea” through the Arabah depression.

But even this distance may be excessive. The text does not claim that Lehi arrived on the shores of the Red Sea, but that he camped “in a valley by the side of a river of water . . . and it emptied into the Red Sea; and the valley was in the borders near the mouth thereof [of the Red Sea]” (1 Nephi 2:6, 8). The wadi in which Lehi camped thus emptied into the Red Sea, but Lehi was not necessarily camping on the shores of the Red Sea itself; he may have been some miles away. Under my reading their journey would have required approximately 40–45 miles per day, not Metcalfe’s 60 miles a day. For a small group to journey from 40–60 miles in antiquity would have been strenuous, but neither impossible nor uncommon.


For example, camels “can cover the 300 kilometers (approximately 185 miles) between Cairo and Gaza in 2 days; they have journeyed alone 640 kilometers in 4 days” (Hilde Gauthier-Pilters and Anne Innis Dagg, The Camel: Its Evolution, Ecology, Behavior, and Relationship to Man [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981], 100); these speeds are approximately 90 miles a day. Thus, even granting Metcalfe’s reading that the journey was a full 180 miles from Jerusalem to the Red Sea, such a journey in three days (60 miles a day) was not at all “unlikel[y].” Travel through barren stretches of wilderness with limited water resources was necessarily accomplished at top speed—to move slowly would more quickly exhaust the water—followed by lengthy rest and recovery periods at sites where water was readily available.
Literary Parallels, Motifs, and Historicity

But the length of the journey is not Metcalfe’s major point; rather, it is that because the journey took three days and ended in a sacrifice, it is therefore based on a literary motif from Exodus. Metcalfe believes that since it is a literary motif, it may not be historical. Metcalfe’s full argument on how literary motifs and parallelisms in the Book of Mormon undermine its historicity runs as follows.

We must ask if the historical sequence of events produced the chiasm or if the chiasm arranged the historical episodes. Because the Book of Mormon apologists say that chiasmus is an intentional literary device, they must conclude that chiasmus can arrange historical episodes. At a minimum this means that some historical details of the Lehite story may not have occurred in the order presented in the narrative. Apologists must also allow for the possibility that some historical incidents never actually happened but were fictions imposed on the text to complete a chiastic structure designed to convey a moralistic or theological teaching. Within this apologetic, the antiquity of Lehi and other Book of Mormon characters may be asserted but the historicity of their actions is open to question. (pp. 168–69)\textsuperscript{114}

Metcalfe once again demonstrates that he has not understood the argument of the historical traditionalists. To argue that there are historical mistakes in names, places, dates, numbers, etc., is entirely within the realm of belief in the antiquity of the Book of Mormon.\textsuperscript{115} All ancient documents, including the Bible and the Book of Mormon, contain historical and scientific errors. Thus, I at last find something I can agree with in Metcalfe’s essay, that “the antiquity of Lehi and other Book of Mormon characters may be asserted but the historicity of their actions is open to question.” I am at a loss to see how this undermines the antiquity of the Book of Mormon text, or the prophethood of Joseph Smith. Nephi, Mormon, Moroni, and other Book of Mormon prophets

\textsuperscript{114} Although this passage refers specifically to chiasmus, his basic line of argumentation would be applicable to other intentional literary devices in the Book of Mormon.

\textsuperscript{115} As noted before, the Book of Mormon itself makes no claim of inerrancy for the text (see references in n. 45).
may have made historical errors or may have shaped the telling of events to suit their spiritual objectives in their text, and still have been real ancient prophets.

But even granting this, Metcalfe’s argument is still muddled. Fundamentally, the phenomenon of literary motifs and parallels in ancient historical writing is an issue of *selection*, both of a pattern which fits the events, and of which specific events to include in a literary pattern. It does not necessitate the wholesale *fabrication* of patterns and events as Metcalfe seems to suppose. First, we must distinguish between perceived and intended motifs. In some cases an author—ancient or modern—may have intentionally introduced a literary motif; in other cases the supposed motif may exist only in the mind of the modern reader. Although the identification of purported parallels is a useful and necessary historical exercise, the identification of parallels is not in itself sufficient to establish intentionality or causality—either from a nineteenth-century or an ancient perspective.\(^\text{116}\)

However, if it can be established that a particular motif was intended, it does not demonstrate that no actual historical event lay behind the literary motif. Metcalfe first asserts that Lehi’s three-day journey in the wilderness (1 Nephi 2:4–7) is nothing more than a literary motif based on Exodus (3:18, 5:3, 8:27). He then wonders “how Sorenson can confidently identify the lengths of other Book of Mormon migrations, which may also be motific or symbolic rather than literal” (p. 162). Note what Metcalfe is attempting here. He first tries to demonstrate that one particular geographical passage in the Book of Mormon *may* be a literary motif based on Exodus, a case which is plausible, but certainly not proven.\(^\text{117}\) Next he asserts—without a shred of

\(^{116}\) Metcalfe recognizes this fact in his discussion of ancient chiasmus (p. 167), but seems unwilling to apply it to the supposed literary motifs he thinks he has identified.

evidence or analysis—that because this particular passage may reflect a literary motif in a text, it may not necessarily be either accurate or historically reliable. Then he contends that, since Lehi’s journey may not really have taken three days, all other geographical data in the entire book are suspect, even though he presents no evidence that any other geographical passages are literary motifs. Finally, since all passages are now suspect, he concludes that we can derive no sound geographical data from the text at all. This line of reasoning is utter nonsense.

A perfectly plausible explanation for literary motifs in historical texts is that the motif came to the mind of the ancient author because of the event. The literary parallel of a three day journey may have been selected precisely because the journey did indeed take three days. If the journey had taken two or four days, no literary motif would have been used. Furthermore, although the selection of which specific historical events to include and which to exclude in a particular narrative may be based on literary motifs, this in no way implies—as Metcalfe would have it—that the events described did not occur.

Literary Motifs and History: the Cases of Noah, Riplakish, and Nero

Metcalfe provides another example of a literary motif which he feels undermines the historicity of the Book of Mormon—a comparison of the stories of Noah and Riplakish (pp. 169-71). After establishing twelve possible parallels between the accounts of the reigns of these two kings, Metcalfe argues that “these mirrorings suggest that one narrative may depend on the other, and that only one, or perhaps neither, represents a factual account of historical events, . . . [and that] allowing for a literary


118 John Gee pointed out to me that Xenophon’s Anabasis 1, 2, 10, contains nearly the same elements as 1 Nephi 2:4-7 in the same sequence: “they remained there [Peltas] three days, during which Xenias, the Arcadian, sacrificed the Lykaion and held a contest.”
device, questions regarding historicity remain” (p. 170). Then, making a logical leap, Metcalfe holds that, “if Noah and Riplakish existed anciently, the historicity of every detail of their biographical sketches is nonetheless uncertain. It is as risky for apologists to stake claims of Book of Mormon historicity on evidence from literary studies as it is on evidence from theories of geography” (p. 171; emphasis added). Furthermore, “even if one could plausibly argue for the antiquity of the Book of Mormon within this context, the historicity of every Book of Mormon person and event would be suspect” (p. 171; emphasis added). This hypercritical methodology represents not only a misunderstanding of the nature of ancient historiography, but a logical blunder.

Metcalfe’s parallels between Noah and Riplakish could be matched with a third case, that of Nero. The following is a summary of Metcalfe’s twelve parallels between Noah and Riplakish, with references to Nero:

1. A righteous king, Claudius, is succeeded by his step-son Nero.120
2. The new king, Nero, does not obey the will of God.121
3. Concubinage of the king.122
4. Sexual promiscuity and abominations of his followers.123
5. Oppressive taxes.124
6. Erection of large palaces.125
7. Building of opulent thrones.126

119 Metcalfe’s further challenge that “apologists must delineate why sacred fiction has greater religious merit when written by ancient prophets than a nineteenth-century prophet” (p. 171), again demonstrates his failure to grasp the substance of the argument I have discussed above.
120 Suetonius, *Nero* 6–7. Claudius can perhaps be considered “righteous” only by Julio-Claudian standards, but he was certainly superior to Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero.
121 Omens of the gods’ displeasure (Dion Cassius, 61); persecution of Christians (Tacitus, *Annals* XV, 44, Suetonius, *Nero* 16); Tacitus apologizes for the “tedious record of crimes and bloodshed” he must recount in his history of Nero. (*Annals* XVI, 16); Suetonius, *Nero* 56.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid., 16, 32.
125 Ibid., 31.
126 Ibid.; this passage does not explicitly mention thrones, but includes a wide array of other imperial extravagance in royal furniture.
8. Craftsmen making “fine work.”
9. Incarceration or murder of dissidents.
10. Revolt and execution of the king.
11. Exile of the followers.
12. Relatives of the king ascend to the throne.

Following Metcalfe’s “method” of analysis, because Nero’s reign can be described in terms of a perceived Book of Mormon literary pattern, we should call into question the very existence not only of Nero, but of “every [Roman] person and event” (p. 171). Needless to say, it is more likely that there is some flaw in Metcalfe’s “methodology” than that Nero never ruled Rome.

Metcalfe seems to be unaware of the fact that much ancient historical writing is fundamentally typological, cyclical, and literary. If we turn, for example, to Egyptian history, we see that every pharaoh’s military campaigns follow a remarkable pattern. But few historians doubt that these campaigns occurred. While it is true that certain elements of literary histo-

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127 Ibid.
128 Murder of his step-brother (Tacitus, Annals XIII, 19–22); murder of his mother (XIV, 7); murder of a rival general (XIV, 22); banishment and then murder of his first wife (XIV, 64); killing of conspirators (XV, 72).
129 Suetonius, Nero 45–49. Although Nero technically committed suicide, it was only to escape his imminent capture and execution by the rebels; Suetonius, Nero 48–49.
130 The fate of some of Nero’s followers is described by Suetonius (Galba, 10–12); specifically, Nero’s German guard was disbanded (Galba, 12).
131 Only in this twelfth point does Nero not precisely fit the pattern devised by Metcalfe; Nero was the last of the Julio-Claudians (Suetonius, Galba 1).
133 Anthony J. Spalinger, Aspects of the Military Documents of the Ancient Egyptians (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982). For discussions of the basic types of Egyptian historical records for the New Kingdom, see Donald B. Redford, Pharaonic King-lists, Annals, and Day-books (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), and his Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 140–43.
134 Cf. Kenneth A. Kitchen’s review of Spalinger, Aspects of the Military Documents of the Ancient Egyptians in Bibliotheca Orientalia 44/5–6 (September–November 1987): 637–41, where Kitchen remarks that, “it is very important to realize that the Egyptian scribes were masters of their literary repertoire, and not its slaves” (ibid., 638). I would like to thank John Gee for this reference.
torical narratives may be called into question, this must occur on an individual basis, based on some evidence or rationale for questioning an event’s authenticity. Historians of antiquity seldom engage in Metcalfe’s blanket condemnation that “every . . . person and event [of ancient history] would be suspect” simply because ancient records consistently exhibit typological literary patterns. Indeed, the fact that the Book of Mormon manifests such an explicitly cyclical and typological view of history is excellent evidence for the antiquity of the document, since in this regard it precisely parallels most ancient historical writing.135

How, then, do we explain the apparent parallels between the stories of Noah and Riplakish? It is worth noting that Mosiah is said to have translated the book of Ether at precisely the time he was composing the book of Mosiah (Mosiah 28:11–20, especially 11). The literary parallels between the reigns of Noah and Riplakish—to the extent that they are real and significant—may be explained as a result of the introduction of the book of Ether into the historical consciousness of the Nephites at precisely the time when the history of king Noah was achieving its final literary form. On the other hand, the specific literary form of Moroni’s abridgment of Ether (Ether 1:1–2) may have been influenced by his earlier editing of the record of Zeniff (Mosiah 9–22).

**Chiasmus and Objectivity**

Continuing his critique of literary motifs in the Book of Mormon, Metcalfe claims that “chiasmus has been touted as one of the best, indeed ‘objective,’ indicators of the Book of Mormon’s Hebraic roots” (p. 162). Metcalfe cites three sources (p. 162 n. 30) which he asserts so “tout” chiasmus.

1. Daniel C. Peterson: “Surely Brodie was right about its [the Book of Mormon’s literary] structural sophistication. And this can be—and increasingly is—demonstrated on quite objec-

135 Remarkably, Metcalfe makes the following statement: “The Book of Mormon and other Mormon scriptures espouse a radically cyclical view of history . . . From this perspective the Book of Mormon accommodates nineteenth-century theology precisely because antebellum thought is seen as a reverberation of former ideas revealed by God, the devil, or humankind” (p. 169 n. 51). Is Metcalfe trying to argue here that a cyclical view of history is more characteristic of antebellum America than of the ancient Near East or Mesoamerica?
tive grounds. Up until now, the prime exhibit for this argument has clearly been the phenomenon of chiasmus.”136 Peterson is here claiming only that the existence of complex literary structure in the text of the Book of Mormon is objective. He makes no claim that complex literary structures such as chiasmus are “objective indicators” of antiquity, as Metcalfe asserts that he does, only that such complexity objectively exists. I doubt that Metcalfe would deny Peterson’s real proposition.

2. John W. Welch: “If the process of identifying chiasmus is to produce verifiable results, the inverted parallel orders must be objectively evident.”137 Again, there is not a hint of a claim that chiasmus is an “objective indicator” of antiquity. Such a claim is entirely in Metcalfe’s mind.

3. John W. Welch: “In my opinion, the case with respect to Alma 36 [as a chiasm] is established. It fits all the rules [for chiasmus], from the objective to the aesthetic.”138 Earlier in the article Welch specifically explained what he meant by “objectivity.” “The chiastic pattern of Alma 36 is objectively verifiable. It is not based on loose connections, imaginative synonyms, or conceptual relationships.”139 What Welch is clearly discussing is the objective nature of the chiastic parallels in Alma 36, by which he essentially means that exactly the same words are repeated in inverse parallel order. He is not arguing that this chiastic pattern is somehow an “objective indicator” of the Book of Mormon’s antiquity.

It seems almost as if Metcalfe is practicing Joycean word association, where the presence of the words objective and chiasm in any text is sufficient grounds for accusing the authors of claiming some level of objective proof of antiquity—something which they in no way claim. None of the sources Metcalfe cites makes any claim that the existence of this chiasmus is somehow an “objective indicator” of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon.140 Indeed, Welch implicitly states just the opposite:

139 Ibid., 129.
140 On the other hand, it is true that some overzealous Latter-day Saints have made unfounded claims about the evidentiary value of chiasms, and some early discussions of the matter may have overstated the case.
“chiasmus is a style of writing known in antiquity and used by many ancient and some modern writers” (p. 114). Such a claim exists only in the mind of Metcalfe, who is attempting to impose it on his “apologists” in order to further his argument. Once again, Metcalfe has seemingly misread the text to bolster his attacks against “apologists.”

The actual position of most historical traditionalists is that the presence of chiasmus and other complex literary patterns in the Book of Mormon is strong evidence for the antiquity of the text. However, although the presence of chiasmus may be objectively identifiable, its evidentiary value for the antiquity of the text is not “objective.” But even though chiasmus may be strong evidence for antiquity, no informed historical traditionalist is making the claim that chiasmus is proof of the antiquity of the text.141

If—as is clearly the case—the believers make no claim of chiasmus as an “objective indicator” of antiquity, then Metcalfe’s entire argument for methodological error on this point falls. Therefore—for Metcalfe—the “apologists” must be making the argument he wants them to be making. This is again apparent in the following passage: “It is inconceivable for some apologists that chiasms are accidental or that Joseph Smith intentionally created these patterns since they presume he was ignorant of the phenomenon. Only ancient writers, they contend, conscious of an established literary device can be responsible” (p. 162). Unfortunately, Metcalfe has not identified a single author who actually claims this; it is simply Metcalfe’s own “straw-man” assertion. In fact, one author Metcalfe cites, Welch, explicitly states exactly the opposite of what Metcalfe asserts he is claiming! “It seems reasonable to believe that occurrences of simple chiasmus . . . can also occur out of habit or convention, subliminally, subconsciously, and even inadvertently. Certainly many

141 Metcalfe himself seems to grant that, despite his counterexamples, chiasmus can still be seen as an important evidence of the antiquity of the text. He is wisely careful not to dismiss entirely the evidentiary value of chiasm, tempering his critique of the examples of chiasm in the Book of Mormon with language such as “militate against” (p. 164), “undermine,” “complicate” (p. 165), “tempers” (p. 166), and “is less persuasive” (p. 167). All of this language implicitly admits that the presence of extended and complex chiasm in the Book of Mormon is excellent evidence for the work’s antiquity.
such simple effects occur in literature written by authors who do not know the technical term for the phenomenon.”

Although Metcalfe quotes from Welch’s “Criteria for Identifying the Presence of Chiasmus,” he apparently did not read it carefully, if at all. This becomes apparent when analyzing Metcalfe’s examples of supposed chiasms he claims to have discovered in early Latter-day Saint writings. He provides only four examples, all of which are very weak. His example from Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–17 (p. 163, fig. 1) is clearly not a chiasm in any sense of the word, but simply a conditional statement in which the if/then clause is reversed in the second half of the condition. His example from Doctrine and Covenants 93:16–18 (p. 163, fig. 2) is better, but breaks down in the middle. In his E line, Metcalfe parallels “heaven” and “earth”—which are not parallels, but opposites! Furthermore, he has two phrases centering on the terms “power” and “dwell,” which have no parallelism whatsoever. Thus, of Welch’s fifteen criteria, Metcalfe’s example fails to meet six: objectivity, purpose, length, density, mavericks, and balance—and is weak on both purpose and centrality. Metcalfe fares much worse on his supposed example from the Joseph Smith diary (p. 164, fig. 3), which fails completely on the grounds of objectivity. A true chiasm must have clear verbal, not vague conceptual, parallels. At best the actual words, or at least close synonyms, must be repeated. Metcalfe tries to establish parallels between “lifted his heel against me” and “lifted his arm against the almighty;” between “deliver him,” and “bones shall be cast;” and between “fowls of heaven,” and “blast of wind.” I am sorry, but simply breaking prose into parallel indented lines does not a chiasm make. Many of these phrases are not in any way parallel. Metcalfe also ignores the early portions of Joseph’s passage about Hurlbut, which form part of the literary unit as a whole. If these are the best examples Metcalfe can discover, then it is clear that chiasmus was not a natural and unintentional

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143 Ibid., 4–8.
144 Ibid., 4.
145 Dean C. Jessee, The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 32. The passage reads “my soul delighteth in the Law of the Lord for he forgiveth my sins and <will> confound mine Enimies.” This passage has no parallel in the rest of the entry, and destroys Metcalfe’s supposed chiastic parallelism.
part of Joseph Smith’s personal speech and writing patterns. Metcalfe’s failed efforts thus actually provide additional evidence that the extended and complex chiasms in the Book of Mormon are indeed excellent evidence for—but lest Metcalfe misunderstand me, I must add, not an “objective indicator” of—the antiquity of the Book of Mormon.146

Metcalfe also fails to deal with the substantial differences between the extremely long, complex and perfect chiasmus in Alma 36, and his short and weak examples. In this regard Metcalfe is essentially trying to argue that, because the numerical sequence 3-2-1-2-3 (Metcalfe’s supposed short nineteenth-century chiasm) has a certain statistical probability of occurring randomly, the sequence 9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1-3-4-5-6-7-8-9 (Welch’s chiasmus in Alma 36, which is over three times the length and much more explicitly chiasmic than any of Metcalfe’s examples), has precisely the same statistical probability of occurring randomly on the basis of the fact that both happen to be inverted sequences. It does not take a doctorate in statistics to recognize the flaw in this argument.

Metcalfe also attempts to demonstrate that, in one case (Mosiah 5:9~12), it is possible to see another literary pattern than that seen by Welch. Metcalfe’s discussion here in fact admits the chiastic structure in the text (which is twice as long as the best of his supposed nineteenth-century examples), but simply argues that he sees a different chiasm than Welch saw. Metcalfe then concludes, “organizing these ideas into chiasms may be the result of subsequent interpreters rather than the intention of the original author” (p. 167). I agree: all that is parallel is not chiasmus, as Metcalfe’s own supposed nineteenth-century examples amply demonstrate. But Metcalfe then attempts to move to a universal generalization: because this one perceived case of chiasmus may be unintentional, all perceived chiasms in the Book of Mormon are potentially unintentional.147 But Metcalfe wants us to go even one step further: since all perceived chiasms are potentially unintentional, therefore all perceived chi-

146 I will not here discuss the example of a supposed chiasm which Metcalfe sees in the writings of W. W. Phelps (pp. 164–65), since the issue is whether chiasms appear unintentionally in the writings of Joseph Smith.

147 Once again, Metcalfe is indulging in a classic fallacy, this time, the “fallacy of the lonely fact [which is] . . . generalization from one single case.” Fischer, Historians’ Fallacies, 109.
asms are, in fact, unintentional. This is because Metcalfe’s argument against chiasmus as evidence of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon rests entirely on the assumption that all chasms in the book were created unintentionally. Metcalfe’s single debatable example can hardly bear the weight of the numerous assumptions that he places upon it.

But, let us, for the sake of argument, accept that the chasms Metcalfe claims to have found in early Latter-day Saint writing are authentic. At best, that would demonstrate that chiasmus is not a final proof of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. But, as noted above, no serious historical traditional scholar has ever made that claim—Metcalfe has made that claim for us. The actual argument is that chiasmus is evidence of antiquity, not conclusive proof. Furthermore, we are not dealing only with a few isolated examples of chiasmus, but with a wide range of very complex forms of literary parallelism. To the extent that such parallelisms are authentic and nonrandom, the probability increases exponentially that they are not the product of Joseph Smith himself, but of a participant in a highly developed ancient literary tradition. Although this does not prove the antiquity of the Book of Mormon, it does provide reasonable grounds for believing in the possibility of antiquity.

Metcalfe finally makes the following revealing statement:

By logical extension Welch’s conclusion also presupposes the transmission of the Book of Mormon through a lineage of ecclesiastical leaders, eventually delivered by an angel to a young prophet who with the aid of stone(s) placed in his hat was able to read the unknown language. Intentionality [of chiasmus] may be weakened for some interpreters when seen in terms of the additional historical assumptions Welch’s thesis presupposes. (pp. 165–66 n. 43)

148 This is another case of the fallacy of possible proof; see above, page 470.
149 See Donald W. Parry, The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns (Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992). Parry provides a 50-page introduction which provides examples of numerous types of complex literary parallelisms which occur in the Book of Mormon.
We could not hope to find a more transparent betrayal of how Metcalfe’s presuppositions control his conclusions. Since angels do not deliver golden plates to young prophets, the Book of Mormon is obviously a nineteenth-century document. The numerous and quite obvious literary patterns in the Book of Mormon must therefore simply be reduced to random chance. Where, I ask, is the rigor in Metcalfe’s method, which amounts to dismissing all evidence which is contrary to his conclusion? By this basic “method,” Metcalfe is able to eliminate all potential parallels to antiquity.

“Gadianton Masonry,” Again?

Metcalfe then proceeds to a critique of the so-called expansionist model of the Book of Mormon—which, according to him, is just as “apologetic” as all other models except his own. Since I do not subscribe to this theory, I will not enter into a lengthy discussion of Metcalfe’s analysis. Nonetheless, Metcalfe makes a particularly egregious error in this section which should not pass unnoticed.

He asserts “that the Book of Mormon accounts of robbers resemble reports of early nineteenth-century insurgencies because the scriptural narrative was imbued with the anti-Masonic rhetoric permeating Joseph Smith’s culture” (p. 171). Metcalfe’s only evidence to support this remarkable claim is the appearance of the word “craft” in Helaman 2:4, and “secret combination” in Helaman 3:23. He does not even deign to provide the usual references to this theory. But most significantly, the supposed Gadianton-Masonry connection has been

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150 Metcalfe is arguing from his conclusions, and is thus guilty of Fischer’s “fallacy of the circular proof [which] is a species of question-begging, which consists in assuming what is to be proved.” Fischer, Historians’ Fallacies, 49.

151 This is also a particularly egregious case of “the reductive fallacy [which] reduces complexity to simplicity, or diversity or uniformity, in causal explanations.” Fischer, Historians’ Fallacies, 172.

debunked by Daniel C. Peterson.153 No one wishing to maintain a relationship between the Gadiantons and Masons has ever responded to Peterson's essays. Metcalfe apparently feels it is sufficient to assert what for him is so obvious a parallel as to require no documentation, while ignoring Peterson's withering critique.154

Variations in the Joseph Smith Translation

Metcalfe argues that "Smith periodically incorporated revisions into the Bible he later discarded because the King James Version (KJV) better articulated his Nauvoo, Illinois, theology" (p. 179). This implies that "the phenomena of the texts—Smith's Bible revisions versus his later assertions about what the ancient writers actually meant and recorded—render the authorial and historical claims of the text ambiguous at best" (p. 180). For Metcalfe this means that we can call into question "the ancient historicity of the Book of Mormon" (p. 182) because of differences and ambiguities between the Book of Mormon quotations from the Bible, the KJV, and Joseph Smith's revisions.

Metcalfe's treatment of differences between Joseph's quotation of scripture in the Nauvoo period, the Joseph Smith Translation (JST), and the Book of Mormon is marred by a characteristic of his approach: he argues against interpretations of the texts which are based on inerrantist presuppositions. Although there are undoubtedly Latter-day Saint inerrantists, Metcalfe should be aware that most Mormons and nearly all historical traditionalists are not scriptural inerrantists.

154 Anti-Mormons such as Metcalfe, who are seeking respectability in the larger academic community, should consider carefully reading and accurately paraphrasing the evidence and arguments provided by their intellectual opponents before making such unsubstantiated assertions. Like the Spaulding theory, I had felt that this particular explanatory model had finally been laid to rest. But like undead zombies from a B-grade horror flick, it seems you can kill these arguments over and over, and yet they still return. Vernal Holley has recently tried to resurrect the corpse of the Spaulding theory; see the review by Ara Norwood in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1 (1989): 80–88, while other anti-Mormons do not seem to realize that Dee Jay Nelson has been dead and buried (both intellectually and literally) for some years.
Furthermore, Metcalfe does not attempt to demonstrate that it is an imperative that the JST must always represent a revealed restoration of an ancient text; quite the contrary, it is widely believed that the JST may frequently represent a modern inspired commentary on the King James Version English text. Robert J. Matthews writes:

To regard the New Translation as a product of divine inspiration given to Joseph Smith does not necessarily assume that it be a restoration of the original Bible text. It seems probable that the New Translation could be many things. For example, the nature of the work may fall into at least four categories: 1. Portions may amount to restorations of content material once written by the biblical authors but since deleted from the Bible. 2. Portions may consist of a record of actual historical events that were not recorded, or were recorded but never included in the biblical collection. 3. Portions may consist of inspired commentary by the Prophet Joseph Smith, enlarged, elaborated, and even adapted to a latter-day situation. This may be similar to what Nephi meant by "Likening" the scriptures to himself and his people in their particular circumstance. (See 1 Nephi 19:23-24; 2 Nephi 11:8). 4. Some items may be a harmonization of doctrinal concepts that were revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith independently of his translation of the Bible, but by means of which he was able to discover that a biblical passage was inaccurate. The most fundamental question seems to be whether or not one is disposed to accept the New Translation as a divinely inspired document.155

Thus it is not clear why Metcalfe insists that every emendation in the JST was intended to represent a textural restoration of an historical manuscript.

Second, Metcalfe maintains that the differences between the JST and Joseph's use of biblical quotations in the Nauvoo period represent "rever[sion] to the KJV as proof[text]" and that

155 Robert J. Matthews, "A Plainer Translation": Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1985), 253. Metcalfe is apparently aware of this book (p. 180 n. 86); as with the chiasmus issue, he would have done well to have carefully read the source he quotes.
“when developing his doctrine of election, Smith returned to the KJV” (p. 179) because it better matched the new doctrine he was inventing. Metcalfe is here engaged in a favorite anti-Mormon sport of mind-reading Joseph’s intentions on the slimmest of evidence. To establish his claim that Joseph intentionally “reverted” to the KJV in Nauvoo in order to “prooftext” his new revelations, Metcalfe needs first to establish the degree to which Joseph used the JST in his later sermons and writings. Metcalfe apparently assumes that he did. Since the JST had not been published at that time, few people in Nauvoo would have known of its contents. It would therefore have been pointless for Joseph to draw formal doctrinal authority from an unavailable manuscript. I am unaware of any detailed study on the use of the JST in sermons of the Nauvoo period, but a quick glance at the scriptural index to the Words of Joseph Smith shows only four references to the JST out of several hundred indexed Biblical scriptures.156 Be that as it may, the burden of proof rests upon Metcalfe to demonstrate that there is a consistent pattern on Joseph’s part of quoting from the JST in most of his sermons and writings, in clear distinction to his “reversion” to the KJV in the specific incidents Metcalfe mentions.

**Contextualizing Historical Documents**

Metcalfe at last informs us of what our methodological approach should be to an ancient text, whose authenticity and antiquity are in question. He asserts that “critical scholars” hold a “nontraditional view of authority [of a text, which] requires that claims be assessed in the context of the narrative and in the historical setting within which the readers first encountered the text” (p. 174; emphasis added). To support this claim he lists a set of books in a footnote, all of which discuss the question of the authority of scripture within religious or intellectual communities (p. 174 n. 71).157 He provides no reference to sections

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157 Metcalfe provides frequent lists of books as suggested readings (pp. 154–55 n. 7; 168 n. 48; 174 n. 71). The fact that he on occasion apparently uses these books as references for ideas which the works themselves do not contain leads me to suspect that he has not read or, at least,
of these books dealing with questions of how to contextualize a controversial document which is possibly a forgery. Although I did not read all of these books in their entirety, I could find no sections in these books where any of the “critical scholars” Metcalfe references make the claim he is making. This is simply Metcalfe’s assertion parading as the universal opinion and methodology of all critical scholars everywhere.

Metcalfe’s claim requires a bit of unpacking. Apparently he means to say here that because “the readers first encountered” the Book of Mormon in the early nineteenth century, it should therefore “be assessed in the context of . . . [that nineteenth-century] historical setting.” But actual historical methodology requires that a text be analyzed in the context in which it was written, not in which it was first read! Metcalfe is attempting to pass off a major revision of standard historical methodology—exchanging writer for reader—in order to discredit the methodology of the historical traditionalists. I quite agree that the Book of Mormon should be contextualized in the historical period in which it was first written; the problem is that there are two possible historical contexts, an ancient one and a nineteenth-century one. Which is the authentic context is precisely the disputed point.

In order to demonstrate that Metcalfe’s version of the methodology of “critical scholars” contextualizing an historical document to the period “within which the readers first encountered the text” is patently bogus, let us apply it to the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in the midtwentieth century. Following Metcalfe’s method, should we examine the Dead Sea Scrolls only in the context of Jordan and Palestine in the midtwentieth century, when the documents were first read? Obviously not, because the document was written in the first centuries before and after Christ. The historical contextualization has not understood some of them. In this case he seems actually to be referring to the first part of a complex sentence; the second half, which presents his controversial point of contextualizing to the readers, remains undocumented. But since the footnote is appended at the end of the sentence as a whole, it makes it appear to the unwary reader that Metcalfe is documenting his highly idiosyncratic approach to historical contextualization. This is, of course, simply another form of the “argument ad verecundiam [which consists] in appeals to all the paraphernalia of pedantry. Among them are . . . Appeals to references.” Fischer, Historians’ Fallacies, 285.
ization should clearly be to that period. If the Book of Mormon is an ancient document, why should it also not be contextualized to antiquity? Why the priority of the nineteenth-century context where Metcalfe claims the “readers first encountered the text”?158

Historical traditionalists are not here denying the usefulness of an examination of the Book of Mormon in a nineteenth-century context. This would be valuable even if the book is ancient. I have elsewhere outlined what I feel is the proper methodology for trying to determine the original historical setting of the Book of Mormon:

1. Assume that the book is an authentic ancient record and analyze it from this perspective; 2. Assume that the book is a nineteenth-century document and analyze it from this perspective; 3. Compare and contrast the successes, failures, and relative explanatory power of the results of these studies; 4. Attempt to discover which model is the most plausible explanation for the existence of the text.159

Rather than respond to this published analysis, Metcalfe preferred to argue against a supposed “apologetic” method which exists only in his fantasy. I await an explanation from any naturalist as to why the attempt to contextualize the Book of Mormon in antiquity is merely an “apologetic,” rather than a serious part of a systematic effort to evaluate the two major possible sources for the text—antiquity and the nineteenth century.

The Argument from Sincerity

Metcalfe seems to be under the illusion that certain traditionalists are arguing that, since Joseph Smith and other early Mormons were apparently sincere in their beliefs in heavenly visions and revelations, those revelations should be accepted as true (p. 174). No one I know has ever made such a claim. Metcalfe is once again grotesquely misreading our position when

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158 It could, of course, be argued that the “readers first encountered the text” in ancient Mesoamerica, when Mormon and Moroni were editing the Book of Mormon. Thus, by insisting on contextualizing only to the nineteenth century, Metcalfe is again begging the question.

159 William J. Hamblin, “Sharper Than a Two-edged Sword,” Sunstone 15/6 (December 1991): 54c.
he argues “against assuming that a perception of prophetic experience is infallible just because a prophet is sincere” (p. 175). Thus, I agree with Metcalfe that “sincerity [of belief] is no reliable index of reality or truth” (p. 174).

The only example which Metcalfe provides of someone supposedly arguing this position is Stephen D. Ricks. Metcalfe quotes Ricks as saying, “‘I am, for instance, convinced that George Q. Cannon was an honest man. When he claims to have seen Christ, I see no reason to doubt him. When Lorenzo Snow, a similarly honest man, claims to have seen Christ, I see no reason to doubt him, either. . . .’” Aside from Ricks’s circularity, this is question begging of the worst kind” (pp. 174–75 n. 72).160 Unfortunately for his readers, Metcalfe fails to provide the context of this argument. Ricks is arguing against the a priori presuppositions of Edward Ashment (and Metcalfe for that matter) that always reject testimony of visions and revelations because, in the minds of those critics, such things simply do not happen.161

Read in the context of the entire paper, Ricks’s argument is as follows: Mr. X is known to be an honest, sane, and intelligent man. Mr. X claims to have seen the resurrected Christ. Since Mr. X is honest, sane, and intelligent, we should take his claims seriously. Such claims cannot be dismissed simply on the a priori assumption that, since God does not exist, Mr. X cannot have seen the resurrected Christ, and therefore must be hallucinating or lying. The argument is not that their sincerity and honesty are proof that they did indeed see Christ. Ricks is arguing against those—like Metcalfe—who would dismiss such claims out of hand because they contradict one’s presuppositions. For Metcalfe the agnostic, the resurrected Christ does not exist. Therefore, it must be impossible for Cannon, Snow, or Smith to

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160 Citing Ricks, “Response to Edward Ashment, ‘Canon and the Historian,’” paper presented at the Mormon History Association, 1 June 1991, 3. Ashment’s paper is now available as “Historiography of the Canon,” in Smith, ed., Faithful History, 281–301. Ricks’s statement may appear to be begging the question—although it actually isn’t in the full form of the argument given below—but I can’t see how his reasoning is circular.

161 Ricks, "Response to Edward Ashment, 'Canon and the Historian,'" 2–3. In a personal conversation with Ricks I have confirmed that I have properly understood the intention of his argument. I hope my discussion here will clarify the matter if the original text was ambiguously phrased.
have seen the resurrected Christ. Ricks is arguing that their general record of honesty, intelligence and sanity compels us to take their claims of visions of Christ seriously. Thus, he is arguing against secularist metaphysical presuppositions which allow them to predetermine what evidence for visionary claims can and cannot be taken seriously.

By quoting this isolated passage out of context, Metcalfe here appears to want Ricks to argue that, because Joseph Smith sincerely believed in his visionary experiences, those experiences were necessarily true. Of course, Ricks is arguing no such thing; once again, the methodological fallacy exists only in Metcalfe's own distorted interpretations. First, we are not maintaining that any prophetic experience is infallible, only that such experiences are real. Second, and more importantly for this issue, no one is arguing that prophetic experiences are real because they are sincerely believed by the visionary. I believe that we should also take the visionary claims of Zarathushtra, the Buddha, or Muhammad seriously, but this does not mean that I necessarily accept their claims as authentic. It is, of course possible for a sincere person to have an hallucination or dream which is interpreted as a prophetic or visionary experience. This is possible for both Mormons and non-Mormons. But the fact that nonrevelatory experiences such as dreams, hallucinations, or intuitions can on occasion be misinterpreted by the recipient as being revelatory is not evidence against the existence of any real revelation. Nor does the fact that certain claimed revelatory experiences are in fact fraudulent prove that therefore all claimed revelations are fraudulent.

The Question of the Witnesses

Metcalfe's treatment of the Three Witnesses is problematic. He realizes that the testimony of the many witnesses to the existence of the golden plates strikes a serious blow to his view of the Book of Mormon as merely a nineteenth-century forgery. For this reason, he must attempt to undermine the reliability of the witnesses of the plates in order to demonstrate that the plates never existed, and that the Book of Mormon is therefore a nineteenth-century document. He attempts this in two ways: first, by declaring that "visions" are not part of the "empirical world"; and, second, by attempting to show that the witnesses claimed other experiences which Metcalfe finds unconvincing and seems
to feel would be unconvincing or disturbing to many Latter-day Saints as well. Metcalfe makes his first argument as follows:

Because they [the Three Witnesses] experienced the plates in a religiously ecstatic context, the experience is best approached from within a visionary tradition. Such a testimonial vision from God is not designed to address the empirical world of its human participants and cannot lend itself to historical-critical assessment (p. 175).

This is sheer nonsense and is significant only as a transparent manifestation of Metcalfe’s own metaphysical presuppositions and special pleading.

First is the claim that the Three Witnesses saw the plates in a “religiously ecstatic context.” Metcalfe does not define what he means by this, but I assume it refers to what the early Saints called “being in the spirit.” To the extent that it is true for the Three Witnesses, it is certainly untrue concerning the testimony of the Eight Witnesses and the other incidental witnesses, all of which Metcalfe conveniently ignores.\(^{162}\)

Second, he says that “the experience is best approached from within a visionary tradition.” Again he fails to tell us what that means, but given Metcalfe’s presuppositions, I assume he means that the visions should be understood as hallucinations.

Third, he insists that “testimonial vision from God is not designed to address the empirical world of its human participants.”\(^{163}\) Notice that Metcalfe uses the term “empirical”—meaning knowledge based on observation and experience—rather than “real.” Reality, of course, includes more things than can be empirically observed or experienced by humans. While an argument could be made that visions are in fact empirical—they are observed and experienced—they are certainly real, just

\(^{162}\) Metcalfe’s approach to the question of the witnesses of the plates consists of ignoring and dismissing all evidence contrary to his presuppositions. To ignore the testimonies of the Eight Witnesses and the incidental witnesses manifests a basic disregard for the fundamental historical principle of dealing with all available evidence, and can hardly be considered either critical or rigorous.

\(^{163}\) I must confess to a certain degree of stupefaction in trying to decipher the ponderous phrase “address the empirical world of its human participants.” I suppose he means “address the human participants of the empirical world,” or perhaps “address the empirical world and its human participants.” It is also not clear how humans are participants in the empirical world rather than an empirical part of that world.
as ultraviolet light is real, even though it is not empirically observable by the human eye. What Metcalfe actually means, however, is that the visions are simply not real. Or, at best they are real only in the sense that hallucinations in the minds of the visionaries have a real basis in the biochemistry of the brain. At worst, they are lies invented by the visionaries.

But here Metcalfe is simply wrong. For the early Saints, a “testimonial vision from God” was indeed “designed to address the empirical world.” A major purpose of the Book of Mormon was precisely to provide empirical proof of the existence of God and of his revelations to the “human participants” of the world. According to the Doctrine and Covenants, the Book of Mormon was given by inspiration, and is confirmed to others [the Three Witnesses] by the ministering of angels, and is declared unto the world by them—Proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old; Thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever. Amen. Therefore having so great witnesses, by them shall the world be judged, even as many as shall hereafter come to a knowledge of this work. And those who receive it in faith, and work righteousness, shall receive a crown of eternal life; But those who harden their hearts in unbelief, and reject it, it shall turn to their own condemnation. (D&C 20:10–15)

Contrary to Metcalfe’s view, this passage seems to be claiming that the experiences of the Three Witnesses were intended precisely to be empirical evidence for the world of God’s existence and revelations.

Metcalfe concludes with the following statement concerning the implications of the visionary claims of the witnesses. It should cause “us to wonder what objective reality meant for them [the witnesses] and if this meaning has any application or relevance to readers today” (p. 178). In other words, what Metcalfe is really saying is that the visions were completely imaginary. Since Metcalfe knows that such things do not happen, we can simply dismiss them.
Anthony Hutchinson’s discussion of this same issue is also strange. First, he asserts that “descriptions of the ‘plates’ given by Smith and his close associates vary enough to suggest that the plates themselves were objects seen in vision” (p. 7). Hutchinson makes not the slightest attempt to show that the descriptions of the plates varied, or if they did why this would indicate that everyone who saw the plates saw them only in a “vision.” He does not explain why the explicitly nonvisionary testimonies of the plates by the eight and other incidental witnesses should be understood as being somehow visionary. Nor does he explain why seeing something in a “vision” somehow proves that the item seen is not real, anymore than why seeing a photograph of something is evidence that the thing being photographed is not real. Next, he makes the deceptive statement that the plates “were in any case not merely archaeological artifacts” (p. 7; emphasis added). Can he be serious? The problem is that Hutchinson believes the plates were merely visionary—they did not exist at all. He is seriously misreading the significance of the plates to the early Saints; the plates were significant evidence of the restoration both because they were tangible, real objects, and because they were accompanied by visionary confirmation from God. If either element were missing—if they were real objects without divine confirmation, or visionary without being real—the significance of the plates would be undermined. Finally, Hutchinson makes this odd statement: “their visionary character does not necessarily make them less real or mere ‘hallucination.’ ” To support this claim he provides not one reason why we should think that a vision of nonexistent plates written by nonexistent people should be seen as anything other than a perfectly lunatic hallucination.

In a further attempt to undermine the reality of the vision of the golden plates, Metcalfe cites a statement by Joseph Smith, “‘the same vision [of the angel and gold plates] was opened to our [Smith’s and Harris’s] view—at least it was, again to me’” (p. 175 n. 74). For Metcalfe, this “impl[ies] that Harris was

165 Certainly, just as a vision may be an hallucination, so movies can also include special effects, creating nonexistent monsters or spaceships. But this does not demonstrate that all movies must therefore be entirely the creation of special effects.
166 Citing Jesse, ed., The Papers of Joseph Smith, I:237 (emphasis added by Metcalfe).
present but may not have shared Smith’s experience” (p. 175). But does it? Metcalfe is once again not only trying to read Joseph’s mind, but grossly distorting the evidence in the process. It seems to me that a much more reasonable explanation is that Joseph is simply telling us what he himself saw; he believes that Harris had a similar experience, but cannot speak with certainty because no one can know for certain what another man has seen. Is there any evidence that my reading of the passage is superior to Metcalfe’s? Indeed there is. Metcalfe conveniently fails to quote the entire passage from Joseph, which continues where Metcalfe broke it off,

and once more I beheld <and heard> all the same things [which had occurred in the first vision with only David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery present], whilst at the same moment, Martin Harris cried out apparently in an extasy of Joy, “’tis enough. ’tis enough mine eyes have beheld, mine eyes have beheld,” and jumping up he shouted Hosanna, and blessed God, and otherwise rejoiced exceedingly.\footnote{167}

Would a genuine scholar be led to assume from this passage as a whole—as Metcalfe tries to convince his readers—that Joseph Smith was “implying that Harris was present but may not have shared Smith’s experience?” Again, we see an indication of Metcalfe’s consistent pattern of distorting the texts to fit his presuppositions.

As anyone who has studied the matter knows, Metcalfe is consciously ignoring a wide range of statements by the Three Witnesses describing their experiences. He conveniently selects texts which contain ambiguities, while ignoring many others which are much clearer.\footnote{168} For example,

\footnote{167} Ibid.

\footnote{168} See Matthew Roper, “Comments on the Book of Mormon Witnesses: A Response to Jerald and Sandra Tanner,” in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 2/2 (Fall 1993): 164–93, for many additional sources and analysis. I would like to thank Matthew Roper for providing me with the following references on the witnesses; he is currently preparing a collection of all primary sources about the plates. Metcalfe’s specific argument concerning the voice David Whitmer heard (pp. 176–77) is simply stale anti-Mormon soup, which Metcalfe offers up as a newly discovered gourmet dish. This topic has been dealt with by Richard Lloyd Anderson, Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 165, and more recently by Matthew Roper, “Comments on
David Whitmer:

I saw them [the plates and other artifacts] just as plain as I see this bed (striking his hand upon the bed beside him).\(^{169}\)

I heard the voice of the Angel just as stated in said Book, and the engravings on the plates were shown to us, and we were commanded to bear record of them; and if they are not true, then there is no truth.\(^{170}\)

Of course we were in the spirit when we had the view, for no man can behold the face of an angel, except in a spiritual view. But we were in the body also, and everything was as natural to us, as it is at any time.\(^{171}\)

After talking as he did, so fully and freely he said "I have been asked if we saw those things with our natural eyes. Of course they were our natural eyes. There is no doubt that our eyes were prepared for the sight, but they were our natural eyes nevertheless."\(^{172}\)

Rather suggestively he [Colonel Giles] asked if it might not have been possible that he, Mr. Whitmer, had been mistaken and had simply been moved upon by some mental disturbance, or hallucination, which had deceived them into thinking he saw the Personage, the Angel, the plates, the Urim and Thummim, and the sword of Laban. How well and distinctly I remember the manner in which Elder Whitmer arose and drew himself

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the Book of Mormon Witnesses,” 181–82. There is a consistent pattern in Metcalfe’s article of resurrecting old anti-Mormon arguments without providing an intellectual pedigree for these ideas, nor even acknowledging the existence of serious Latter-day Saint responses to his arguments.


\(^{170}\) James H. Hart Interview, 21 August 1883, Richmond, Missouri, James H. Hart Notebook, in Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 96.

\(^{171}\) David Whitmer to Anthony Metcalf, March 1887, in Anthony Metcalf, Ten Years before the Mast (Malad, IN: n.p., 1888), 73–74.

\(^{172}\) Nathan Tanner Jr. to Nathan A. Tanner, 17 February 1909, in Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 192–93.
up to his full height—a little over six feet—and said, in solemn and impressive tones: "No, sir! I was not under any hallucination, nor was I deceived! I saw with these eyes and I heard with these ears! I know whereof I speak!"  

Martin Harris:

Bishop Barter: "Are you sure you saw the Angel and the Records of the Book of Mormon in the form of Gold Plates?"

Martin Harris: "Gentlemen," and he held out his right hand, "do you see that hand? Are you sure you see it? Or are your eyes playing you a trick or something? No. Well as sure as you see my hand so sure did I see the Angel and the plates. Brethren, I know I saw and heard these things, and the Lord knows I know these things of which I have spoken are true."

Although Harris had a visionary experience, he is also an incidental witness of the plates. He claimed that "while at Mr. Smith's I hefted the plates, and I knew from the heft that they were lead or gold, and I knew that Joseph had not credit enough to buy so much lead."

"I know that the plates have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice declared it unto us; therefore I know of a surety that the work is true. For," continued Mr. Harris, "Did I not at one time hold the plates on my knee an hour-and-a-half, whilst in conversation with Joseph, when we went to bury them in the woods, that the enemy might not obtain them? Yes I did. And as many of the plates as Joseph Smith translated I handled with my hands, plate after plate." Then describing their dimensions, he pointed with one of the fingers

173 Joseph Smith III et al., Interview, July 1884, Richmond Missouri, in Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 134–35.
of his left hand to the back of his right hand and said, "I should think they were so long, or about eight inches, and about so thick, or about four inches; and each of the plates was thicker than the thickest tin."176

Oliver Cowdery:

I beheld with my eyes. And handled with my hands the gold plates from which it [the Book of Mormon] was translated. I also beheld the Interpreters. That book is true.177

Thus, the overall message of the testimony of the Three Witnesses was that, although their experience was visionary, it was nonetheless absolutely real—the two are mutually exclusive only in the minds of secular naturalists such as Metcalfe. But let us grant, for the sake of argument, that Metcalfe is correct, and that Cowdery, Whitmer, and Harris were unreliable witnesses, given to hallucinations and flights of fancy, and that their testimonies of the golden plates should therefore be discounted. This in no way solves the historical problem for Metcalfe. For Metcalfe fails to deal both with the testimony of the Eight Witnesses, who claimed to have seen the plates in a completely nonvisionary setting, and with that of the numerous additional incidental witnesses who saw or held the plates in situations which were neither visionary, nor overtly contrived by Joseph Smith.178 Indeed, Metcalfe does not even mention that additional witnesses to the plates exist at all! Take for instance, the following story told by Lucy Smith:

Joseph, on coming to them [the plates which were hidden in the forest in a hollowed log], took them from their secret place, and, wrapping them in his linen frock, placed them under his arm and started for home. . . .

178 See Anderson, Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses, for a general discussion and numerous examples.
Traveling some distance . . . a man sprang up from behind [a log] and gave him a heavy blow with a gun. Joseph turned around and knocked him down . . . About half a mile farther he was attacked again . . . and before he reached home he was assaulted the third time. In striking the last one, he dislocated his thumb, which, however, he did not notice until he came within sight of the house, when he threw himself down in the corner of the fence in order to recover his breath. As soon as he was able, he arose and came to the house. He was still altogether speechless from fright and the fatigue of running.179

Remembering that Metcalfe would have us believe that the plates simply did not exist—they were merely “visionary”—how does he explain this story? Can it not lend itself to “historical-critical assessment?” How does it relate to Metcalfe’s “empirical world”? There are several possible explanations: 1. Joseph invented the story to fool his family. 2. Joseph was hallucinating. If so, this was not simply an ordinary dream or vision, but a monumental hallucination. First, Joseph hallucinated that he was carrying the plates into the woods, hiding them in a log. Then he hallucinated that he ran through the forest with the plates, being attacked by nonexistent attackers. (Or perhaps the attackers were real, and Joseph was only hallucinating that he was carrying sixty pounds of golden plates.) 3. The experience really occurred, and Joseph really did have the plates. I would sincerely like to know which of these explanations, or perhaps some other, Metcalfe and other naturalists accept.

There are many similar incidents, a selection of which are given below.

**David Whitmer:**

I—Did the eight witnesses not handle the plates as a material substance?

He—We [the Three Witnesses] did not, but they did, because the faith of Joseph became so great that the

angel, the guardian of the plates, gave the plates up to Joseph for a time, that those eight witnesses could see and handle them.  

**John Whitmer:**

I am aware that your name is affixed to the testimony in the Book of Mormon that you saw the plates?

He—It is so, and that testimony is true.

I—Did you handle the plates with your hands?

He—I did so!

I—Then they were a material substance?

He—Yes, as material as anything can be.

I—Were they heavy to lift?

He—Yes, and as you know gold is a heavy metal: they were very heavy.

I—How big were the leaves?

He—So far as I recollect, 8 by 6 or seven inches.

I—Were the leaves thick?

He—Yes, just so thick, that characters could be engraved on both sides.

I—How were the leaves joined together?

He—In three rings, each one in the shape of a D with the straight line towards the center.

I—in what place did you see the plates?

He—in Joseph Smith’s house; he had them there.

I—Did you see them covered with a cloth?

He—No. He handed them uncovered into our hands, and we turned the leaves sufficient to satisfy us.  

|O|]ld Father John Whitmer told me last winter, with tears in his eyes, that he knew as well as he knew he had an existence that Joseph Smith translated the ancient writing which was upon the plates, which he “saw and handled,” and which, as one of the scribes, he helped to

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180 P. Wilhelm Poulson Interview, No date, Richmond, Missouri, Deseret Evening News, 16 August 1878, in Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 22. David Whitmer was one of the Three Witnesses, but in this passage he is discussing his understanding of the experience of the Eight Witnesses.

copy, as the words fell from Joseph’s lips, by supernatural or almighty power.\textsuperscript{182}

**Hyrum Smith:**

We was talking about the Book of Mormon, which he [Hyrum] is one of the witnesses. He said he had but two hands and two eyes. He said he had seen the plates with his eyes and handled them with his hands.\textsuperscript{183}

[I] had been abused and thrust into a dungeon ... on account of my faith. ... However, I thank God that I felt a determination to die, rather than deny the things which my eyes had seen, which my hands had handled, and which I had borne testimony to, wherever my lot had been cast; and I can assure my beloved brethren that I was enabled to bear as strong a testimony, when nothing but death presented itself, as ever I did in my life.\textsuperscript{184}

**Lucy Mack Smith:**

[On the morning of September 22, after Joseph had returned from the hill, he placed] the article [the Nephite interpreters] of which he spoke into my hands, and, upon examination, [I] found that it consisted of two smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glass, and the glasses were set in silver bows, which were connected with each other in much the same way as old fashioned spectacles. ... [H]e [Joseph Smith] handed me the breastplate spoken of in his history. It was wrapped in a thin muslin handkerchief, so thin that I could feel its proportions without any difficulty. It was concave on one side and convex on the other, and extended from the neck downwards, as far as the center of the stomach of a

\textsuperscript{182} Letter of Myron Bond to Saints’ Herald, 2 August 1878, Cadillac, Michigan, in Saints’ Herald 25 (1878): 253.

\textsuperscript{183} Sally Parker to Francis Tufts, 26 August 1838, Sunbury, Ohio, cited in Richard Anderson, Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses, 159.

man of extraordinary size. It had four straps of the same material, for the purpose of fastening it to the breast. 185

I asked her [Lucy Smith] if she saw the plates. She said no, it was not for her to see them, but she hefted and handled them. 186

William Smith:

I was permitted to lift them as they lay in a pillow case; but not to see them, as it was contrary to the commands he had received. They weighed about sixty pounds according to my best judgment. 187

They were not quite as large as this Bible. . . . One could easily tell that they were not stone, hewn out to deceive, or even a block of wood. Being a mixture of gold and copper, they were much heavier than stone, and very much heavier than wood. 188

Emma Smith:

[During the translation] the plates often lay on the [table in our home], without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen tablecloth, which I had given him [Joseph Smith] to fold them in. I once felt . . . the plates, as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes

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188 “The Old Soldier’s Testimony,” sermon of William B. Smith, Saints’ Chapel, Deloit, Iowa, 8 June 1884, as reported by C. E. Butterworth, *Saints’ Herald* 31 (1884): 644.
thumb the edges of the book... I did not attempt to handle the plates, other than [through the linen cloth].

**Katherine Smith Salisbury:**

She [Katherine] told me Joseph allowed her to "heft" the package but not to see the gold plates, as the angel had forbidden him to show them at that period. She said they were very heavy.

**Mary Musselman Whitmer:**

Sometime after this my [David Whitmer's] mother [Mary Musselman Whitmer] was going to milk the cows when she was met out near the barn by this same old man (as I suppose from her description of him) who said to her "you have been very faithful and diligent in your labors but you are tried because of the increase of your toil, it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness, that your faith may be strengthened" and thereupon he showed her the plates. My Father and Mother had a large family of their own. The addition to it therefore of Joseph, Emma and Oliver very greatly increased the toil and anxiety of my mother and altho she had never complained she had sometimes felt that her labor was too much or at least she was beginning to feel so. This circumstance however completely removed all such feelings and nerved her up for her increased responsibilities.

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191 Orson Pratt/Joseph F. Smith Interview, 7–8 September 1878, Richmond, Missouri, Joseph F. Smith Diary, Latter-day Saint Church Archives, in Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 28.
Alvah Beman:

[Beman] was with Joseph at one time assisted him in hiding the Plates, from a mob he was permitted to handle the Plates with a thin cloth covering over them.¹⁹²

Specific examples could be further multiplied. The point is that Metcalfe cannot dismiss the existence of the plates by proclaiming that the experiences of Cowdery, Whitmer, and Harris were "religiously ecstatic," from a "visionary tradition," and therefore "not designed to address the empirical world." There are too many other incidents and witnesses in too many nonvisionary circumstances for Metcalfe's theory to be given any credence.

But unfortunately, Metcalfe never provides us the details of a concrete counterproposal as to what either the "visionary" or the non-"visionary" experiences of the plates really were; he is satisfied simply to proclaim that they were "visions." This is because, unlike a genuine historian, he is not attempting to formulate an explanatory model of Joseph Smith, but merely wishes to demonstrate that the traditional interpretation is wrong, and that Joseph was therefore not a prophet. This, indeed, is one of the flaws of the entire naturalist enterprise—they fail to develop a coherent explanation for the writing of the Book of Mormon. Few, if any, even deal with the most basic issue of whether they believe Joseph was consciously or subconsciously creating his piece of pious frontier fantasy. For example, did Joseph have the actual text of the King James Version Isaiah or Matthew in front of him as he wrote the Book of Mormon, consciously copying it word for word? Or had he memorized the entire book of Isaiah, thereby enabling him to produce it subconsciously? I suspect that no naturalist has ever attempted to develop a complete and coherent counterexplanation, because when they do, they find themselves in a causal and explanatory morass from which it is impossible to escape. Whether one believes Joseph wrote the Book of Mormon as a conscious fraud, or was in some psychologically dissociative state which allowed him to believe he had plates when he really did not, numerous explanatory problems arise. The naturalists therefore remain content with attempting to show that the traditional understand-

of the origin of the Book of Mormon is unsatisfactory, ignoring their own causal problems by refusing to develop complete and coherent counterexplanations beyond simply asserting that Joseph simply wrote the Book of Mormon. This is rather like explaining that birds fly south for the winter by “instinct.” In reality, unless the complex nature of “instinct” is explained, it is rather like saying birds fly south “by magic.” Likewise, unless the naturalists can provide a complete and coherent explanation of the myriad of causal factors behind Joseph’s supposed forging of the Book of Mormon, they are essentially asserting that Joseph wrote it “by instinct,” or “magic.” Should we tolerate such shoddy pseudoscholarship? If naturalists want their explanations of the origin of the Book of Mormon to be taken seriously, they must provide explicit, specific, detailed, and coherent explanations for the origin of the Book of Mormon.

Metcalfe’s “Conclusions”

Metcalfe’s “Concluding Observations” (p. 184) are a fitting end to a muddled and confusing essay. Like so many of Metcalfe’s pseudo-pious conclusions, his final page is fundamentally misleading. Metcalfe has publicly admitted that he is an agnostic and does not believe any of the truth claims of the Church. In light of this admission, what are we to make of his statement that

a pattern emerges from Smith and his successors that fresh inspiration leads to change. Indeed, change is the

193 It has become traditional for Metcalfe essays to end with such pseudo-pious claims. See Metcalfe, “The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis,” in New Approaches to the Book of Mormon, 434, where he calls Joseph a “charismatic seer.” Compare this notorious statement: “When we realize that there is no empirical evidence for or against scriptural inspiration, we begin to avail ourselves of a more sensitive, responsible scholarship as well as a more honest faith.” (Read: when we realize there is no evidence for the gospel, we can abandon our belief in it.) Vogel and Metcalfe, “Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Cosmology,” 211–12. Such deceitful masking of one’s true beliefs by implicit but unacknowledged redefining of the language of faith has become increasingly fashionable in some dissenting and revisionist circles of the Church, and I am heartily sick of it. In the future, it would be nice if the dissenters and revisionists—who claim to be telling us “the Truth” about the Church—could somehow manage in the process to state their own true beliefs honestly and clearly.

194 See n. 33.
hallmark of Latter-day Saint theology, not the exception. By virtue of this heritage believers should welcome and even expect that historical and theological perspectives on the Book of Mormon will be subject to continuing refinement (p. 184).

What Metcalfe probably means by this statement is not that the gospel is revealed "line upon line" (2 Nephi 28:30, D&C 98:12, 128:21), but that Joseph simply made up the entire restoration (whether intentionally or unintentionally is unclear), and therefore could change it whenever it suited his fancy. Thus, while Metcalfe refuses to allow for the changes in perspective required by the limited geography because it "contradict[s] Joseph Smith’s own pronouncements on the Book of Mormon" (p. 160), he nonetheless maintains that completely abandoning Joseph Smith as a prophet (in any meaningful sense of the term) is somehow a legitimate extension of basic Latter-day Saint beliefs. For Metcalfe, limited geographical interpretations of Book of Mormon geography are apologetic attempts to bolster a faltering doctrinal structure, but Metcalfe’s own absolute denial—not only of the revelations and the prophethood of Joseph Smith, but of the very existence of God—is merely an innocuous “fresh inspiration [that] leads to change” (p. 184). This is so obviously bogus and self-serving as to require no further comment.

Metcalfe’s claim that “methodological integrity can only be maintained if we are willing to explore intricacies of the phenomena of Mormon scripture which can transform the most fundamental assumptions of antiquity and historicity” (p. 184) is a dialectical two-edged sword. What Metcalfe apparently means is that we can only be methodologically “honest” if we jettison the truth-claims of the gospel and accept the restoration as entirely the work of human beings. But Metcalfe’s advice that we permit the “transform[ing of] the most fundamental assumptions of antiquity and historicity” (p. 184), is advice that would be well taken by the revisionists and secularists. Can we not question Metcalfe’s own “most fundamental assumptions of antiquity and historicity,” such as “you don’t get books from angels and translate them by miracles; it is just that simple”?195 Why are we

195 Sterling M. McMurrin, in Blake Ostler, “An Interview with Sterling McMurrin,” Dialogue 17/1 (Spring 1984): 25, reflecting senti-
to be branded “apologists” when we submit Metcalfe’s and other revisionists’ writings and interpretations to the same critical analysis which they insist we apply to the Book of Mormon and Church history? Metcalfe’s own agnostic presuppositions, assumptions, and interpretations need to be questioned just as rigorously as do the interpretations of those who accept the possibility of true revelation and the antiquity of the Book of Mormon.

Metcalfe further claims that

when placing details together we would be irresponsible to alienate the Book of Mormon from other texts which Joseph Smith professed to have translated or said stemmed from the same inspired source. Only from this rudimentary historical framework can an honest quest for understanding the Book of Mormon begin. One can dismiss problems of historicity by harmonizing them in isolation with what are frequently contradictory rationalizations (p. 184).

While I agree with Metcalfe that all primary data needs to be considered in interpreting the Restoration, Metcalfe has added an additional flawed methodological element. What Metcalfe is insisting is that, since it is his presupposition that the Book of Mormon emerged entirely from the mind of Joseph Smith, all of Joseph’s other writings and opinions, whether personal, purporting to be ancient documents, or modern revelation, should be equally valid as sources for understanding their ultimate source: the mind of Joseph. This is simply thinly disguised question-begging, since the origin of the Book of Mormon is precisely the issue at hand.

In conclusion, Metcalfe’s writing betrays an academic immaturity which could benefit from a healthy dose of disciplined tutelage in a good undergraduate program. His entire article has the form of scholarship, but denies the power thereof. It exhibits such a consistent pattern of misrepresentation of both primary sources and the arguments of his intellectual rivals, that it raises serious questions as to whether any of Metcalfe’s work should be taken seriously. If the editors of Dialogue wish to retain their

ments with which Metcalfe would undoubtedly concur (see Metcalfe, pp. 165–66 n. 43, and my discussion above).
journal’s status as an important Latter-day Saint intellectual publication, they should seriously reconsider the editorial procedures and criteria for evaluation that allowed the publication of such a shoddy article.