Editor’s Introduction: Doubting the Doubters

Daniel C. Peterson


1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

Introduction to the current issue, as well as editor’s picks. Peterson discusses the theory of evolution, the historicity of Christ’s resurrection, and the techniques used by Jerald and Sandra Tanner in their research.
Editor's Introduction: 
Doubting the Doubters

Daniel C. Peterson

The writing of reviews, and the editing of them, can be a thankless task. Some people think the very activity unchristian. The authors being reviewed, of course, are understandably skittish about critics, and seldom are they altogether pleased with the results. Even those of us who work at the task of reviewing are conscious of the often subjective nature of the enterprise. Criticism of our fellow human beings, it has been said, is often merely the disapproval of people not for having faults but for having faults different from ours. It can be so with the criticism of books, as well.

Nevertheless, criticism and reviewing are certainly useful, in much the same way that weeding is useful. Granted that some gardeners—especially the botanically challenged, like myself—not infrequently pull up perfectly good flowers along with the weeds, still the garden will do better (on balance) with a gardener than without one. With regard to books, of course, the most important critic is time. Homer has been appreciated for nearly three millennia; many highly touted novels last only a few months and are then mercifully forgotten. Ultimately, the capacity of the critic to do either good or ill is probably much less than he imagines or than his targets fear.

It is important to note, however, that the job in gardening is not only to pull weeds. The gardener's task is to nourish and encourage beautiful flowers and to display them, to cultivate nutritious fruits and vegetables and to harvest them. The analogy breaks down a bit here, because reviewers, qua reviewers, probably do very little to nourish and to cultivate good books. Authors do that. By helping to prune away the bad, though, perhaps critics clear the ground for better writing to prosper, and perhaps their
criticisms help future writers to avoid the mistakes of their predecessors. (I confess that prolonged exposure to anti-Mormon literature has made me a little less confident on this score than I once was.) Indisputably, reviewers can call attention to good books and articles, and they can certainly participate in the harvesting of good literary fruit.

Critics have not always, of course, been known primarily for their zeal to harvest and display good work. They have often been somewhat morose, even dyspeptic. "As a rule," wrote G. K. Chesterton in 1909, "there is no difference between the critic and [the] ascetic except that the ascetic sorrows with a hope and the critic without a hope." This is perhaps one of the reasons why the word criticism has taken on so generally negative a hue. We at the FARMS Review of Books, however, have considerable hope. The gospel is true, the kingdom is rolling forth, and much good scholarship and writing has been and is being produced by believing Latter-day Saints.

I should like to showcase some of that scholarship and writing. As I have done in recent issues of the Review, I shall identify texts or items treated in the present issue, and shall offer my own bottom-line ratings. I have formulated these evaluations on the basis of the reviews published herein, occasionally informed by my own direct acquaintance with the materials or by further conversations with the relevant reviewers. The judgments remain subjective, in the final analysis, and they are unnuanced and imprecise, but I shall do my best. (For more nuanced discussion, obviously, readers should turn to the reviews themselves.) First, an explanation of the rating system:

**Editor's Picks**

**** Outstanding, a seminal work of the kind that appears only rarely.

*** Enthusiastically recommended.

** Warmly recommended.

* Recommended.

---

With that out of the way, we can now proceed directly to the ratings. First a drum roll, then the opening of the envelope, and then, without distracting comment, the results (for whatever they may be worth):


Evolving Developments

I want to draw attention to several other books, as well. They have not received reviews here, and very probably will not, but they have provided me some high-grade intellectual entertainment in recent months and I think others beside myself may well find them interesting.

The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies does not have an official position on the question of organic evolution. We certainly do not have an officially negative position. Indeed, I fully know the opinion on the matter of only one member of the FARMS Board of Trustees, and he is a convinced evolutionist. This *Review*, moreover, has published only one article dealing with evolution, and that article proceeded from an avowedly pro-evolutionary stance.²

Evolution is not a question over which I myself have lost much sleep. I have, for years, been pretty much an agnostic on the subject. Nevertheless, since a more or less Darwinian evolutionary theory is important to virtually every form of modern naturalism or antisupepnaturalism, I have occasionally given a glance in its direction. “The entire scientific ethos and philosophy of modern western man,” notes Michael Denton,

is based to a large extent upon the central claim of Darwinian theory that humanity was not born by the creative intentions of a deity but by a completely mindless trial and error selection of random molecular patterns. The cultural importance of evolution theory is therefore immeasurable, forming as it does the centrepiece, the crowning achievement, of the naturalistic view of the world, the final triumph of the secular thesis which since the end of the middle ages has displaced the old naive cosmology of Genesis from the western mind. . . . [T]oday it is perhaps the Darwinian view of nature more than any other that is responsible for the agnostic and sceptical outlook of the twentieth century.3

There is a great deal, an inexpressibly great deal, resting on the question of whether this universe is a closed system of atoms and the void—a system in which all can be explained without residue as merely matter in ultimately pointless motion. Shakespeare’s Macbeth, burdened with bloody sin and looking unrepentantly into the face of death, summed that view up eloquently:

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.4

4 Macbeth, 5.5.24–28 (Rowse).
I have been surprised, in recent years, to notice what I now suspect is a growing tendency among very good and reputable thinkers to question evolutionary dogma. I had naively assumed that, conservative Latter-day Saints and fundamentalist Protestants aside, all educated people—certainly all intellectuals—accepted evolution. I was immensely surprised, therefore, when, in talking with him repeatedly over the summer of 1990, I began to realize that Huston Smith, the eminent authority on world religions, is an outspoken critic of the theory of evolution. He is far from being a Christian fundamentalist and, with his impeccable academic credentials (including years of teaching at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), he is nothing at all like the backwoods bumpkin creationists that I had been led to imagine were the only folks who rejected Darwinism. Yet there he is.

Since that time, I have watched with mounting interest what I see as the emergence of an intellectual critique of evolution that has little if any link to Protestant fundamentalism or, indeed, directly to religion of any kind. It cannot be dismissed as a reprise of the infamous Scopes Monkey Trial. It features neither simplistic appeals to the authority of scripture nor sermonizing on the fact that my grandpappy wasn't a monkey. So far as I can see, it offers up no conveniently ignorant William Jennings Bryan to be fatally humiliated by a new Clarence Darrow.

Norman Macbeth's *Darwin Retried* was the first book I read on the subject, and I was intrigued by the logical case he constructed against Darwinian evolution. Michael Denton's *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis* argued, on the basis of a lengthy analysis ranging from molecular biology to paleontology, that "the problems [with evolutionary theory] are too severe and too intractable to offer any hope of resolution in terms of the orthodox Darwinian framework." Phillip Johnson, a prominent law professor at the University of California at Berkeley, subjected the theory of evolution to calm but withering criticism in his *Darwin on Trial* and followed it up with his important book *Reason in the

---

Balance. Within just the past few months, David Berlinski, a mathematician and philosopher who has taught in both the United States and France, has written a fascinating piece on “The Deniable Darwin” for Commentary. Finaly, Michael Behe, who teaches biochemistry at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, has just published a new book entitled Darwin’s Black Box. In it, he contends that the astonishing complexity of the cell, which we have only begun to appreciate in recent decades, is impossible to explain on the basis of the gradualistic changes assumed by evolutionary theory. Rather, he says, the structure of the cell must have been purposefully devised by an intelligent designer—whether that designer be God or some other vastly intelligent and powerful being or beings.

What is the relevance of this? I am, as I have said, largely unconcerned with the truth or falsity of the theory of evolution. I think it possible, though not at all certain, that the central principles of the restored gospel can ultimately be reconciled with some modified form of evolution. But since faith in a blind evolutionary process is essential to the most common forms of naturalism, which are in turn among the chief enemies of belief in the gospel, I must admit that these recent writings have put me in exceptionally good spirits. I am pleased that some are beginning to recognize that evolution can itself be just as much a faith commitment and a world view as any religion, and can be just as dogmatically held, for reasons that are just as susceptible to psychological reduction, as a religion can be. “One might have expected,” observes Michael Denton,
that a theory of such cardinal importance, a theory that literally changed the world, would have been something more than metaphysics, something more than a myth. Ultimately the Darwinian theory of evolution is no more nor less than the great cosmogenic myth of the twentieth century. Like the Genesis based cosmology which it replaced, and like the creation myths of ancient man, it satisfies the same deep psychological need for an all embracing explanation for the origin of the world which has motivated all the cosmogenic myth makers of the past, from the shamans of primitive peoples to the ideologues of the medieval church.\textsuperscript{11}

I commend the books by Macbeth, Denton, Johnson, and Behe, and the article by Berlinski, to anybody interested in evolution, or in the broader question of whether good science commits us to a world view that excludes God. They make a powerful case for the proposition that rational people can be theists, believers in an intelligent and purposeful creator. This is a valuable contribution. After all, if one is convinced that a purposeful cosmos is an impossibility, there is little reason to look at the particular claims of any specific religion. Such claims will have already been destroyed by the one universal solvent, blind evolution. For those who are inclined to think along such lines, perhaps overawed by the sheer weight of the scientific authority that seems to be arrayed against theistic belief, it is pleasant to know that the foundation of evolutionary theory, which itself lies at the foundation of modern naturalism, may not be wholly secure. Not a few serious and reasonable observers have concluded, with Michael Denton, that “after a century of intensive effort biologists have failed to validate it in any significant sense.”\textsuperscript{12}

While I am on the issue, permit me also to commend a book by Hugh Ross, an astrophysicist/cosmologist and former postdoctoral fellow at the California Institute of Technology, entitled

\textsuperscript{11} Denton, \textit{Evolution}, 358.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 357.
The Creator and the Cosmos.\textsuperscript{13} Dr. Ross has established an organization in southern California called “Reasons to Believe,” which specializes in often quite intriguing scientific apologetics for a conservative form of Christianity. Like Professor Behe, he argues for the presence of intelligent design in the universe.

Finally, I shall recommend with considerable enthusiasm a pair of books about the greatest miracle of them all, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ: The volume Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead? supplies the text of a debate between Antony Flew and Gary Habermas about the historicity of Christ’s resurrection, accompanied by the postdebate comments of several prominent thinkers of various persuasions.\textsuperscript{14} Reading it, I was genuinely surprised to realize how strong the historical case for the resurrection is. (And, I must say, I was delighted to see a well-known and widely respected atheist philosopher get thoroughly thumped on this issue by a little-known professor of philosophy at a small Christian college.) Last, but certainly not least, I heartily endorse Stephen Davis’s wonderful recent book, Risen Indeed.\textsuperscript{15} A philosophy professor in Claremont, California, Davis argues forcefully and rigorously for the plausibility of Christ’s resurrection as a genuine event in nonmetaphorical history.

It need scarcely be said that, if Jesus is alive, naturalism is dead.

\textbf{But There Are Still Weeds to Be Pulled}

We now turn briefly from the sublime to the, well, less sublime. In the recently published second volume of their Answering Mormon Scholars, Jerald and Sandra Tanner devote nearly four pages to a rather ponderous discussion of an anonymous parody


\textsuperscript{14} Gary R. Habermas, Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

\textsuperscript{15} Stephen T. Davis, Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). I might add here that I consider at least some of the vast literature on so-called “Near Death Experiences” a significant and, thus far, unanswered challenge to the naturalistic world view.
of their work that appeared in the spring of 1996. Neither their discussion nor the unsigned spoof is of lasting cosmic significance. Still, I think one important fact does emerge from this episode.

Using the same techniques that they have elsewhere employed in their ongoing attempt to demonstrate that portions of the Book of Mormon were dishonestly cribbed from, say, Josiah Priest or Ethan Smith or even the King James Bible, the Tanners point to Tom Nibley as the secret author of the parody. At one point, in fact, without actually naming the notorious miscreant by name, they even suggest that Daniel Peterson collaborated with Nibley in this matter. To strengthen their hypothesis, they point to thematic and other parallels between Tom Nibley’s published writing and the parody, and they allude to Professor Peterson’s reputed knowledge of matters Islamic, which, they suspect, is reflected in the unsigned send-up.

Their arguments are interesting. They are plausible. They do seem to indicate that Nibley and Peterson were involved. The only real problem with the Tanners’ arguments is that they are completely misguided. I can say with some confidence, and even with some regret, that Professor Peterson had never heard of the parody until after its completion. Furthermore, I happen, now, to know the actual identity of the spoof’s author. Tom Nibley is innocent.

What should interest students of the Tanners and their works here is that when, in this case, they focused their usual literary investigative techniques on a question where the right answer can be known (by me and a few others, at least) with absolute certainty, they got it all wrong. They weren’t even very close. Accordingly, their seemingly significant parallels are, in fact, meaningless and misleading. Is this important? I think it is. The Tanners’ performance on this small but revealing matter hints that their (quite similar) approach to Latter-day Saint scripture, on the basis of which they ask members of the Church to abandon faith in the restored

---

16 Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, Answering Mormon Scholars: A Response to Criticism Raised by Mormon Defenders, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1996), 16–20. Copies of the parody can perhaps (who knows?) be obtained directly from the Tanners. I am sure that they would be grateful for any expressions of interest.
gospel, is open to serious doubt. A useful bit of data, that, and well worth my being unjustly accused as, in effect, an unindicted co-conspirator.

Appreciation and Explanation

As usual with the Review, many people have contributed time and effort to making it work. Alison V. P. Coutts, William J. Hamblin, Noel B. Reynolds, Shirley S. Ricks, Melvin J. Thorne, and John W. Welch offered excellent editorial assistance and many valuable suggestions. (I adopted some, and rashly rejected others.) Marc-Charles Ingerson, Andrew D. Taylor, and Jeffrey W. Dauterman helped with source checking and in making recommendations to better the reviews. Michael P. Lyon assisted in preparing the accompanying figures. Paul Hoskisson came in handy at a crucial point in the process. And, as always, there are the reviewers, without whom the editor would look a little silly. My thanks to them all.

We employ the abbreviations that are customary in Latter-day Saint publishing. The Journal of Discourses appears as JD, while TPJS refers to Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith and HC denotes B. H. Roberts’s compilation of the History of the Church (which is commonly but incorrectly referred to as the Documentary History of the Church) and CHC denotes Comprehensive History of the Church (written by B. H. Roberts).