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- Abstract** This study presents the basic Latter-day Saint beliefs about the Bible and documents the relationship between these beliefs and the approach and results of historical biblical criticism. Latter-day Saints believe the Bible is the word of God but do not believe it is inerrant or sufficient and thus is supplemented by other revealed ancient texts—most notably the Book of Mormon. Latter-day Saints believe in the pursuit of truth through “study and faith” and are thus not opposed to intellectual examination of scripture. In fact LDS scholars selectively use biblical critical methods in defending of their scripture. At the same time Mormons are defensive about the historicity of the Bible and the Book of Mormon—and thus find themselves with a tradition of conflict with the results of modern biblical criticism that challenge these assumptions. A growing number of LDS scholars in the church who are trained in the historical critical approach to scripture has resulted in renewed discussions and studies about the relationship between faith and scholarship. These discussions are enhanced by a greater openness in the church regarding the critical study of its history, and the results of this approach have also generated biblical and Book of Mormon studies relating to historical critical issues.
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# “We Believe the Bible to Be the Word of God, as Far as It Is Translated Correctly”: Latter-day Saints and Historical Biblical Criticism

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IN 1842 JOSEPH SMITH PUBLISHED the basics of Latter-day Saint (LDS) belief in thirteen articles of faith.<sup>1</sup> In Article of Faith 8 he succinctly set forth their belief about the Bible: “We believe the Bible to be the word of God.” While there is no evidence that Smith was familiar with Maimonides or his writings, in a strange coincidence Maimonides, in the twelfth century, also set forth thirteen principles of Jewish belief, and number 8 in his list also dealt with the Bible: “I believe with perfect faith that the entire Torah that is now in our possession is the same that was given to Moses our teacher, peace be upon him.”<sup>2</sup>

Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the world of antebellum America that was saturated with

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I would like to acknowledge Religious Education at Brigham Young University for providing funding for a week at the Oxford Summer Research Institute at Harris Manchester College at Oxford University where much of the work was done for this essay.

1. Joseph Smith sent a letter to John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat*, that contained a short history of the church and a list of thirteen statements of Mormon belief, most beginning with “We believe.” These statements eventually were canonized as scripture in the Pearl of Great Price and called the Articles of Faith.

2. Fred Berthold Jr. and Alan W. Carlsten, *Basics Sources of The Judeo-Christian Tradition* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 344.

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biblicism.<sup>3</sup> He and the early Latter-day Saints revered the Bible, read the Bible, and preached from the Bible.<sup>4</sup> They accepted the Protestant canon of the Old and New Testaments as their Bible, and they read and interpreted the Old Testament as being fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ. In addition, Latter-day Saints came to accept three other books as canonized scripture: the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Mormons call their canon of scripture the standard works, and they believe in an open canon, meaning that scripture has been added and can be added to the standard works in the future. Most Latter-day Saints were and continue to be literalists and traditionally believe in the historicity of biblical events and persons. Mormons often feel closely connected to biblical persons and prophecies and believe that they are directly connected with the events and teachings of the restoration in the latter days.

Just as Christians, including Mormons, see Jesus and the New Testament as a fulfillment of Old Testament types and prophecies, so Latter-day Saints tend to see the latter-day restoration as a fulfillment of biblical prophecies. Early Mormons were particularly interested in Old Testament prophecies, and similar to the tradition of *pesharim* in the Dead Sea Scrolls, LDS scripture in the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price interprets many Old Testament prophetic passages as prophecies that were being fulfilled in their time with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the gathering of Israel, and the preparations for the millennium. The angel Moroni, when he appeared to Joseph Smith in 1823, explained the meaning of the restoration as a fulfillment of biblical prophecies, including Malachi 3–4, Isaiah 11, and Acts 3:22–23 (see JS—H 1:36–41).

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3. See Philip Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in the American Religion*, updated ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10–45; and Grant R. Underwood, “The Old Testament in the New Dispensation,” in *A Symposium on the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1983), 169–72.

4. In fact Joseph Smith and early church leaders based their sermons on the Bible more than on the Book of Mormon. See Grant R. Underwood, “Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology,” *Dialogue* 17/3 (1984): 35–74.

In addition, the Book of Mormon interprets the image of the voice from the dust in Isaiah 29:4 as a prophecy of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 26:15–16), and Smith in the Doctrine and Covenants interpreted the image of the two sticks in Ezekiel 37:15–17—representing Judah and Ephraim being reunited—as a prophecy of the uniting of the two scriptural records of the Bible and the Book of Mormon (D&C 27:5). Latter-day Saints typically believe that the fulfillment of Malachi 4:5–6, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet,” occurred when the resurrected Elijah appeared in the Kirtland Temple in 1836 to deliver the keys of turning the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers (D&C 110:13–16). Latter-day Saints also characteristically feel connected to Old Testament figures, events, and rituals—for example, being baptized into the Abrahamic covenant, receiving a patriarchal blessing with its declaration of lineage to one of the twelve tribes of Israel, and participating in temple ordinances closely connected with Old Testament ritual and directed under the authority of Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods. For these reasons Latter-day Saints are inclined to take the historicity of biblical figures and events seriously.

Latter-day Saints usually have a distinctive, if not unique, understanding of their own scripture that can be demonstrated by an experience I had at a large professional biblical studies banquet. While we were sitting around a table, someone noticed that I was a Mormon and asked me to briefly explain how the Book of Mormon came about. I began by describing how an angel named Moroni, who helped to write the Book of Mormon, came to Joseph Smith and delivered gold plates from which Smith would eventually translate the Book of Mormon. The visit of the angel Moroni was followed by the visits of several other divine messengers who brought further light, knowledge, and authority. As I was talking, I carefully noticed the looks on the faces of the twenty people around the table, some of them renowned biblical scholars. I realized that I was the only one there who actually believed that an angel would come out of heaven in the 1820s to visit a modern prophet, and I realized that Latter-day Saints, as believers in angels and gold plates

are understandably cautious about the results of higher criticism that call into question the historicity of certain ancient events and persons.

The concept of scripture as “the word of God” can mean many different things to many different people. A standard LDS definition of the word of God can be found in the Doctrine and Covenants: When holy men of God write or speak by the power of the Holy Ghost, their words “shall be scripture, . . . shall be the word of the Lord” (D&C 68:4). Thus, Latter-day Saints typically view the word of God as inspired but not necessarily confined to written scripture.

In Mormon doctrine and culture, another well-known image may give some insight on how Latter-day Saints traditionally view the word of God. The Book of Mormon recounts a dream in which mortals traverse mortality toward eternal life, which is symbolized by the tree of life (1 Nephi 8–11; 12:16–18; 15). Most Latter-day Saints view the sure guide toward the tree of life—passing through the temptations and trials of mortality—as the iron rod, which is defined as “the word of God.”

## The Bible as the word of God

Joseph Smith left a legacy of keys for interpreting the word of God, some of which are common to other biblical traditions and some that are distinctly Mormon. LDS scholars usually look to this legacy as a guide to their scholarship. In order to better understand the background Mormon scholars bring to scripture study, I have chosen what I think are the seven most important elements of this legacy.

### *1. The Bible is not perfect, complete, or sufficient*

The first part of Article of Faith 8, “We believe the Bible to be the word of God,” is followed by a significant qualification—“as far as it is translated correctly.” This qualification distances Latter-day Saints from some Bible believers that adopt a position of biblical inerrancy. Joseph Smith explained this qualification in several ways. Using the word *translation* in a wider sense than normal, he taught that the Bible has suffered loss and corruption in the course of its transmission. Two statements

from Smith will illustrate this. First, he said, “From sundry revelations which had been received, it was apparent that many important points touching the salvation of men, had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled.”<sup>5</sup> Second, he said, “I believe the Bible as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers. Ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors.”<sup>6</sup> In addition to these two quotations, a Book of Mormon passage describing the Bible states that “many plain and precious things [are] taken away from the book” (1 Nephi 13:28).

Thus, while Joseph Smith believed the Bible to be the word of God, he separated himself from other Christian believers in the Bible in that he also believed that the Bible was incomplete, full of errors, and insufficient. Smith addressed these problems in several ways. First, he produced three more books of canonized scripture, including the Book of Mormon (an ancient book), the Doctrine and Covenants (a collection of modern revelations), and the Pearl of Great Price (which contains two documents that claim an ancient pedigree—the Books of Moses and Abraham). Most Latter-day Saints believe these books came about through the process of revelation and are considered part of the standard works.

## *2. The Joseph Smith Translation is an inspired aid to biblical interpretation*

Regarding the phrase “as far as it is translated correctly,” Joseph Smith also reports having been commanded by God to produce a divinely inspired revision of the Bible (1830–34). This was not a normal translation in that no ancient texts were involved; instead, it consisted of Smith, often accompanied by a scribe, sitting down to read the King James Bible and then adding, emending, and correcting the KJV text of the Bible. The product of this work is called the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) and includes revisions to the Old and New Testaments that Latter-day Saints understand as inspired. As part of this work, Smith revised Genesis 1–6, now called the Book of Moses and included in

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5. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 9–10.

6. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 327.

the Pearl of Great Price; the Book of Moses dramatically expands on the biblical text by including chapters on Moses, Adam and Eve, and Enoch that are otherwise unknown from antiquity. In addition, he made significant additions, alterations, and clarifications to the biblical text. Latter-day Saints traditionally consider this one of the important inspired works of Joseph Smith as a prophet and use it in varying ways in scriptural interpretation.

### *3. The Bible was revealed to and transmitted by humans and bears a stamp of its historical context*

Smith's attitude toward the Bible and perhaps to all scripture was that the word of God was revealed to and transmitted by humans and bears the stamp of its historical context. This is one of the ideas behind historical criticism—that ancient texts must be viewed within the cultural and chronological contexts in which they were produced. Joseph Smith, in the context of the revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants, directly attributed this idea to God. A revelation records, “Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding” (D&C 1:24).

In a similar vein Brigham Young later argued that the scriptures would have been revealed differently in different times and places: “Should the Lord Almighty send an angel to re-write the Bible, it would in many places be very different from what it now is. And I will even venture to say that if the Book of Mormon were now to be re-written, in many instances it would materially differ from the present translation. According as people are willing to receive the things of God, so the heavens send forth their blessings.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise Brigham Young clarified, “Revelations, when they have passed from God to man, and from man into his written and printed language, cannot be said to be entirely perfect.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, there is LDS precedent for Mormon interpretation of

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7. *Journal of Discourses*, 9:311.

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scripture that makes allowances for historical and cultural influences and infelicities.

#### 4. *The Bible can be read in its original language*

In his enthusiasm to better understand the Bible, Smith set about to learn Hebrew in order to read the text of the Bible in the original language—an important pursuit for one who wished to translate the Bible more correctly. He also began to learn German so he could read from the Luther Bible, which he declared to be “the most correct” that he had found.<sup>9</sup> In order to learn Hebrew, Smith hired a Jewish tutor, Joshua Seixas, to come to Kirtland and teach biblical Hebrew.<sup>10</sup>

On January 19, 1836, Joseph Smith recorded in his journal: “Spent the day at school. The Lord blessed us in our studies. This day we commenced reading in our Hebrew Bibles with much success. It seems as if the Lord opens our minds in a marvelous manner, to understand His word in the original language.”<sup>11</sup> A month later, he wrote: “Attended the school and read and translated with my class as usual. My soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original.”<sup>12</sup>

In the process of attempting to better understand the Bible, Smith would turn to the original Hebrew: “I am now going to take exceptions to the present translation of the Bible in relation to these matters [interpreting prophecy]. Our latitude and longitude can be determined in the original Hebrew with far greater accuracy than in the English version. There is a grand distinction between the actual meaning of the prophets and the present translation.”<sup>13</sup> Joseph Smith provided a model for LDS

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9. *History of the Church*, 6:307, 364.

10. For Smith’s study of Hebrew in Kirtland, see Matthew J. Grey, “‘The Word of the Lord in the Original’: Joseph Smith’s Study of Hebrew in Kirtland,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 249–302.

11. *History of the Church*, 2:376; taken from a Joseph Smith journal entry, January 19, 1836, Kirtland, Ohio.

12. *History of the Church*, 2:396; taken from a Joseph Smith journal entry, February 17, 1836, Kirtland, Ohio.

13. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 290–91.

scholars to seriously pursue scripture study by learning to read the word of God in the original language with the hope that it would assist in a more accurate understanding of scripture.

### *5. Scripture is given and interpreted by the Holy Ghost*

Smith operated on the premise that the ultimate guide and authority to the interpretation of scripture is the Holy Ghost. “I have the oldest Book in the world [the Bible] & the Holy Ghost I thank God for the old Book but more for the Holy Ghost.”<sup>14</sup> He often claimed to use the direction of the Holy Ghost in conjunction with his study of the Bible in Hebrew to render creative biblical interpretations. He also used inspiration of the Holy Ghost to produce the Book of Mormon and the Books of Moses and Abraham. Smith also received a revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants that extends the boundaries of scripture to include anyone who speaks through the Holy Ghost: “And whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation” (D&C 68:4).

This concept creates for Latter-day Saints the idea of a living tradition of oral scripture,<sup>15</sup> as well as written statements by church authority that may be deemed as scripture. Where these teachings and statements (generally by church leaders and generally of a doctrinal or devotional nature) comment on or otherwise show thematic affinity to scripture, they are collected and used by members and LDS scholars—especially in recent years—as authoritative interpretation.

In conjunction with this tradition of living scripture, the church has always taught that their leaders are not infallible. Joseph Smith explained that “a prophet [is] a prophet only when he [is] acting as such,”<sup>16</sup> and a statement by the First Presidency supports this: “The Church has always taught that its leaders are human and subject to

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14. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 345.

15. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 68–71.

16. *History of the Church*, 5:265.

failings as are all mortals. Only Jesus was perfect, as explained in this statement from the First Presidency: The position is not assumed that the men of the New Dispensation—its prophets, apostles, presidencies, and other leaders—are without faults or infallible, rather they are treated as men of like passions with their fellow men.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the church gives the responsibility to the individual to determine which of the sayings of the prophets and church leaders should be authoritative.

#### *6. Students of the Bible can seek knowledge by study and by faith*

According to Latter-day revelation, “the glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth” (D&C 93:36); “pure knowledge . . . shall greatly enlarge the soul” (D&C 121:42); and, “seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). From the beginning Latter-day Saints have been encouraged to pursue the life of the mind, including as it pertains to scripture.

In terms of study, Smith taught that the gospel should seek all truth from any source without fear: “The first and fundamental principle of our holy religion is, that we have the right to embrace all, and every item of the truth, without limitations or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men.”<sup>18</sup> This, of course, can be seen as an example to seek truth in secular learning, which includes biblical studies and methodologies.

An example of what Latter-day Saints understand by “learning by faith” can be illustrated by a passage in the Book of Mormon where Moroni invites the reader of the Book of Mormon to find out the truth of the ancient texts through a personal spiritual experience: “And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the

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17. James R. Clark, introduction, quoting B. H. Roberts, *Messages of the First Presidency*, ed. James R. Clark (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970), 4:xiv–xv.

18. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 229.

Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things” (Moroni 10:4–5).

### *7. The church continues to use the King James Version as its official translation*

In spite of all the discussion about the Bible “as it is translated correctly,” through time the church has continued to maintain the traditional Protestant translation of the 1611 King James Version as the official version for English-speaking members. In 1979 the church created an official LDS edition of the Bible (based on the KJV) with interpretive notes, cross-references, and chapter headings as well as a Bible dictionary, which effectively formalized many of the traditional LDS interpretations of scripture—including attribution of authorship and dating of texts, historicity of events and persons, and doctrinal interpretations. Much discussion continues among LDS intellectuals as to whether to use the King James Version in worship, discourse, and teaching in the modern English-speaking church. On the one hand, for the lay members and scholars alike, reading and understanding the archaic English of the King James Version can be a hindrance to reading and interpreting the Bible. Much has been learned about Hebrew and Greek since 1611 as reflected in the more accurate modern translations. On the other hand, we must remember that Latter-day Saints actively use five books of scripture—the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price—based on the KJV and Jacobean English, and thus the use of the King James Version can be an aid in recognizing the intertextuality of the various texts. If Latter-day Saints were to move to a more modern translation of the Bible, some of the linguistic connections between these five books would be lost. While this translation is used only in English and therefore by about half the members of the church, it does rely on a Bible that is hard to read and for all its virtues is not the most correct translation.<sup>19</sup>

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19. For a discussion about whether Latter-day Saints should continue to use the King James Version, see Grant Hardy, “The King James Bible and the Future of Missionary Work,” *Dialogue* 45/2 (2012): 1–44, who argues that the church would be better

## We also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God

The final clause of Article of Faith 8 reads: “We also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.” Since this statement is not followed by any qualifier like “as far as it is translated correctly,” it seems clear that Joseph Smith intended to distinguish it from the Bible. Smith established the preeminence of the Book of Mormon in scripture when he declared: “I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.”<sup>20</sup> Even though he declared the Book of Mormon as the “most correct book,” it does not mean it is perfect since even the ancient authors warned of the possibility of errors based on the weaknesses and failings of the ancient authors.<sup>21</sup> Because of this statement by Smith and because of the divine process of its preservation and translation, most Latter-day Saints consider the Book of Mormon to be more reliable than the Bible.

The Book of Mormon claims to be an ancient record of people who were led by God from Jerusalem to the Americas in 600 BCE at the time of King Zedekiah. Within this record appears a shorter record of another people who came to the Americas from the time of the Tower of Babel. The record from which the Book of Mormon was produced was preserved on a set of gold plates that were delivered to Smith by a heavenly messenger named Moroni—the last prophet/record keeper of this people. The Book of Mormon presents a narrative of over a thousand years of history, including details of political developments, geography, religion, population movements, prophets, wars, etc. In terms of our discussion today, the Book of Mormon cites and alludes to the Old and New Testaments hundreds of times and includes twenty-one chapters of Isaiah, two of Malachi, and three of Matthew.

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served with more modern English translations; and Ronan Head, “Unity and the King James Bible,” *Dialogue* 45/2 (2012): 46–58, who argues for the wisdom of keeping the traditional translation as the official Bible of the church.

20. *History of the Church*, 4:461.

21. See title page; 1 Nephi 19:6; Mormon 8:12, 16–17; 9:31; Ether 12:23–25.

From the above points, one can summarize the LDS legacy of biblical interpretation bequeathed to us by Joseph Smith: We believe the Bible to be the word of God, but it is not perfect, complete, or sufficient; thus it has been supplemented with three books of additional canonized scripture, Smith's inspired revision, and decades of inspired commentary. For Latter-day Saints, the Bible was revealed through and transmitted by humans and bears evidence of its historical context. Learning ancient scriptural languages can be useful, though the final authority of LDS biblical interpretation is the Holy Ghost. Latter-day Saints are enjoined to fearlessly pursue knowledge and learning through study and faith. In addition, the official English version of scripture for Latter-day Saints is the King James Version. Finally, the statement "we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God" is an invitation to correlate our biblical understanding and interpretation through the Book of Mormon.

### History of LDS scholarship and higher/historical criticism

Higher criticism is the result of the application of and reliance on reason that started in Western culture during the Enlightenment. This kind of discourse has reshaped stances and approaches to scripture and has often been seen as presenting a challenge to faith communities because of its emphasis on treating the text as subject to normal forces of human production.

In general, according to its proponents, historical criticism concludes that the biblical texts, like secular texts, can be largely accounted for as human products. The results of higher criticism call into question some of the basic and fundamental tenets of most biblically based religions, including the historicity of key biblical figures, the reliability of historical accounts, the divine authorship of biblical books, the reality of prophecy, the divinity of Jesus, and the probability of miracles—including the resurrection from the dead. Latter-day Saints often feel the implications of this inquiry as sharply as do other Judeo-Christian religions.

Believers in the divine authorship of the Bible have reacted in various ways to higher criticism. Many simply choose to ignore this approach to scripture. On the other hand, some are convinced by the

results of higher criticism and experience a faith crisis that culminates in withdrawal from the community. Some attempt to develop arguments against it. Some fully and some partially accept its conclusions and readjust their beliefs to fit. Some choose to engage the methods of biblical criticism and also to bracket judgments concerning specific issues in order to accommodate their faith. There are LDS members and scholars in each of the above categories.

As documented by Philip Barlow's book *Mormons and the Bible*, through time there have been occasions and personalities who attempted to introduce higher criticism in the church and at Brigham Young University.<sup>22</sup> This can be illustrated by an episode in Mormon history called the Chicago Experiment. In 1906 Brigham Young University president George Brimhall recruited a number of University of Chicago-trained professors in psychology, education, and biology to come to BYU and enhance the academic excellence of the University. This group included William H. Chamberlin, who was trained in philosophy and higher biblical criticism. These professors came and began to teach evolution and biblical higher criticism in an attempt to demonstrate how these ideas could be taught in a way compatible with the more conservative ideas held by the church. Eventually, however, these ideas were seen as inappropriate for BYU, and these men were forced to resign, "charged by the Church Board of Education with, among other things, 'following the "higher criticism" of Lyman Abbott; treating the Bible as "a collection of myths, folk lore, dramas, literary productions, history and some inspiration."'"<sup>23</sup> Following this episode, various individuals—some trained scholars and some not, who also held ecclesiastical offices in the church, including B. H. Roberts, Joseph

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22. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 112–61. The history of LDS scholars as they have interfaced with historical criticism—especially the Documentary Hypothesis—has been examined in some detail by Anthony Hutchinson, "LDS Approaches to the Holy Bible," *Dialogue* 15/1 (1982): 99–124; and Kevin Barney, "Reflections on the Documentary Hypothesis," *Dialogue* 33/1 (2000): 57–99.

23. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 146. For a detailed review of this episode, see Casey P. Griffiths, "The Chicago Experiment: Finding the Voice and Charting the Course of Religious Education in the Church," *BYU Studies* 49/4 (2010): 91–130.

Fielding Smith, and James E. Talmage—put forth various views and attitudes toward higher criticism.

In spite of the few who were sympathetic and who have championed critical approaches to scripture in the past, for the most part these efforts have failed, and more conservative attitudes have prevailed. The general atmosphere in the church and even among religious education professors at the university is to ignore the results of higher criticism; in cases where specific issues are raised, Latter-day Saints tend to fend off those ideas that seem destructive to faith.

A brief review of the current generation of LDS biblical scholars and scholarship begins with Hugh Nibley, a scholar who taught at BYU from 1946 through 1994; he was responsible for generating much of the scholarly enthusiasm for antiquity that continues in the church today. Nibley, trained at Berkeley in ancient history, began to explore ancient texts using the comparative method that was popular at the time to find evidence that defended the church from attacks against the antiquity of the Book of Mormon, the Books of Moses and Abraham, and LDS temple worship and theology. He, along with other biblically trained scholars in the church, generally ignored, avoided, or criticized the methods of higher criticism as being threats to faith. Being trained in a myriad of ancient languages, Nibley scoured the ancient literatures of the world, where he found and published a wealth of ancient parallels to LDS scripture and to Mormon temple worship that were interpreted by most Latter-day Saints as vindication that the restoration scriptures authentically linked them to the past. However, while Nibley generally avoided the methods of higher criticism, he sent out a generation of his students, most hoping to continue the defense of their faith, to receive higher educations at universities where they would be trained in these methods.

Following Nibley's comparative model, many LDS scholars began a tradition of studying ancient temples and produced volumes of studies that explore various ancient Near Eastern aspects of temples.<sup>24</sup> One of Nibley's students, John Lundquist, wrote a dissertation at the University

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24. See, for example, Hugh W. Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992); and Donald W. Parry, ed.,

of Michigan articulating a typology of ancient temples that is regularly cited by scholars in the discipline such as John Walton and Gregory Beale (who themselves are producing scholarship similar to that of Nibley).<sup>25</sup> In general, LDS scholars tended to work in areas that did not interface directly with the higher criticism of the Bible—like ancient history, apocryphal and pseudepigraphical studies, classics, archaeology, Coptic studies, Dead Sea Scrolls, Egyptology, and textual criticism. Many LDS scholars are active in their academic studies beyond their faith community but also bring their academic training to bear on LDS scriptures. LDS scholars have contributed to the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, the *Coptic Encyclopedia*, and *Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, and four LDS scholars were part of the team of scholars who published the Dead Sea Scrolls. LDS scholars regularly read papers at professional meetings, including the Society of Biblical Literature, in various fields: Old and New Testament, archaeology, apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, Egyptology, religious art, biblical law, papyrology, Dead Sea Scrolls, Hebrew pedagogy, Northwest Semitics, and Mormon studies.

Some of these scholars even began to use the tools of biblical criticism, including some aspects of historical criticism in their work on LDS scriptures. Scholars have and continue to produce text-critical editions of the LDS scriptures, including the Book of Mormon, Doctrine

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*Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994).

25. John M. Lundquist, "What Is a Temple: A Preliminary Typology," in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall*, ed. H. B. Huffmon, F. A. Spina, and A. R. W. Green (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 205–19. See John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006) and Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), which describes Genesis 1 as a temple text. See also the observation made by Beale that "some of the affinities in ancient pagan beliefs and religious institutions to that of Israel's may be due to the fact that they are garbled, shadowy representations about the being of the biblical God and of his design for his dwelling place," in G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 51. See also Steven W. Holloway, "What Ship Goes There: The Flood Narratives in the Gilgamesh Epic and Genesis Considered in Light of Ancient Near Eastern Temple Ideology," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 103 (1991): 328–55.

and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.<sup>26</sup> Scholars also began using the tools of higher criticism in their study and defense of LDS scripture. Latter-day Saints are historically comfortable, for example, with the methods and assumptions of source and redaction criticism since their scriptures—especially the Book of Mormon—were constructed by combining sources through a redactor. Even the modern Doctrine of Covenants shows signs of the redaction of various texts. One scholar proposed that the traditional Documentary Hypothesis could help explain some of the sources of the Book of Mormon.<sup>27</sup> Additionally LDS scholars began to use the results of form criticism in finding examples of some of the biblical forms like the treaty/covenant pattern,<sup>28</sup> the prophetic lawsuit,<sup>29</sup> throne theophany,<sup>30</sup> and heavenly ascension<sup>31</sup> in the Book of Mormon and other Mormon scripture. Professor John W. Welch of BYU has long been associated with the SBL Biblical Law Section and has

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26. Royal Skousen, *The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project* and ongoing series of publications covering the various facets of the text of the Book of Mormon (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001–); Robert J. Woodford, *The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants*, 3 vols. (PhD diss, Brigham Young University, 1974); Kent P. Jackson, *The Book of Moses and the Joseph Smith Translation Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 2005); and Brian M. Hauglid, *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010).

27. John L. Sorenson, “The ‘Brass Plates’ and Modern Scholarship,” *Dialogue* 10/4 (1977): 31–39.

28. Stephen D. Ricks, “The Treaty/Covenant Pattern in King Benjamin’s Address (Mosiah 1– 6),” *BYU Studies* 24/2 (1984): 151–62; RoseAnn Benson and Stephen D. Ricks, “Treaties and Covenants: Ancient Near Eastern Legal Terminology in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005): 48–61, 128–29.

29. Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, “King Benjamin’s Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* ed. John Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 148–223; and John W. Welch, “Benjamin’s Speech as Prophetic Lawsuit,” in Welch and Ricks, *King Benjamin’s Speech*, 225–32.

30. Blake Ostler, “The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis,” *BYU Studies* 26/4(1986): 67–95.

31. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David Larsen, “The Vision of Moses as Heavenly Ascent,” in *Temple Themes in the Book of Moses*, ed. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2010).

written numerous articles and a lengthy study of the evidence of ancient Near Eastern law and rhetoric in the Book of Mormon.<sup>32</sup> In addition Welch has published several important volumes on New Testament topics and is the founder of the LDS New Testament commentary series.

Perhaps most interesting is a movement among some LDS scholars following the ideas of Margaret Barker, a Methodist scholar.<sup>33</sup> The basic idea of this group is directly connected with the idea formulated in the Documentary Hypothesis that the D-strand—essentially the book of Deuteronomy and the related Deuteronomistic History in the book of Judges—is a form of propaganda and a product of Josiah's reform in 623 BCE. Barker argues that Josiah's reform, called by some the Deuteronomistic Revolution, effectively purged idolatrous objects and practices from Judahite religion but at the same time purged many ancient and authentic beliefs of biblical religion going back to the time of Abraham, including the tree of life, council visions, associations between stars and angels, El Elyon as the High God and Yahweh as his son, the Holy One of Israel, Melchizedek priesthood, Wisdom traditions, and the Mother of the Son of God. She further argues that these elements of the purged ancient religion are preserved in later Jewish and Christian apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature. Certain Mormon authors—because some of these teachings resonate with LDS beliefs in the Book of Mormon and in Mormon temple traditions—have adopted and promulgated this view in terms of Mormon studies.<sup>34</sup> This group has established an institution called the Academy for Temple Studies and has an annual conference at which they invite respected scholars of

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32. John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: BYU Press and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008).

33. Kevin Christensen, "The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 59–90. Christensen, though not a trained biblical scholar, is a published scholar of Latter-day Saint scripture and is one of the most articulate and informed advocates and commentators on Barker's scholarly views and their relationships to Latter-day Saints scholarship.

34. Kevin Christensen, "Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies," *FARMS Occasional Papers*, no. 2 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001).

other institutions, faiths, and denominations to share their insights. This is an example of LDS scholars who have adopted a very selective subset of the assumptions and results of higher criticism and have used them to defend the historicity of the Book of Mormon and the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith.<sup>35</sup>

From this survey we can see that while some LDS scholars avoid areas dealing with higher criticism, they are perfectly willing to use methods and sometimes assumptions of higher criticism as long as it can be harnessed in the explication and defense of their faith. In addition, the qualifying statement “as far as it is translated correctly” as given in the eighth article of faith gives Latter-day Saints a fair amount of latitude in dealing with biblical texts.

This brings us to the most significant point of conflict between Latter-day Saints and higher criticism as expressed in the final statement of Article of Faith 8: “We also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.” The Book of Mormon, as we have explained, is held by most Latter-day Saints to be an ancient book and a fruit of their early prophet, Joseph Smith. Meanwhile, critics of the Book of Mormon, using historical criticism, have argued that some features of the Book of Mormon argue against its antiquity. Five examples of these features include:

1. The Documentary Hypothesis: The Book of Mormon speaks of the five books of Moses (1 Nephi 5:11), a concept that many scholars believe could have come into existence only well after the exile (586 BCE). Some of the language, themes, and stories in the Book of Mormon do not fit well with the dates and presumed editing of JEDP sources.
2. The Book of Mormon quotes long biblical passages from the King James Version.

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35. Margaret Barker and Kevin Christensen, “Seeking the Face of the Lord: Joseph Smith and the First Temple Tradition,” in *Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 143–74.

3. The Book of Mormon quotes long portions of Second Isaiah (chapters 48–54), believed by most scholars to also be postexilic (and therefore not to have been composed at the time they were supposed to have been quoted by Book of Mormon authors).
4. The Book of Mormon contains many quotations and allusions to New Testament passages that appear to be anachronistic.
5. The Book of Mormon has a highly developed Christology, which critics say could only have developed in post–New Testament times.

Needless to say, LDS scholars have offered a host of defenses against these claims in arguing for the antiquity of the Book of Mormon in various fields, including archaeology, biblical studies, geography, linguistics, Near Eastern parallels, and Mesoamerican studies.<sup>36</sup>

In 1988 LDS scholarship had a dramatic confrontation with higher criticism at Brigham Young University. David Wright, now a well-known biblical scholar and professor of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University, was terminated from Brigham Young University based on his beliefs and teachings about the Bible and Book of Mormon. The reasons given for Professor Wright's termination are that his beliefs derived from historical criticism: (1) that the Book of Mormon was best explained as a nineteenth-century document; (2) that prophecies in the Old Testament were generally addressed to their times and not the future; and (3) skepticism about the historical accuracy of the Bible.<sup>37</sup> Later, in 1994, David Wright—then a professor at Brandeis University—was formally excommunicated from the church. The primary evidence of his apostasy was his publication of an article entitled

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36. For collections of such studies, see John L. Sorenson and Melvin Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991); John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992); John W. Welch, Donald W. Parry, and Daniel C. Peterson, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002).

37. Barlow, *Bible and Mormons*, 155n91.

“Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in the Search for Religious Truth” in a journal of Mormon thought called *Sunstone*.<sup>38</sup>

While the church does not make public statements about these church disciplinary councils, this action did take place in an environment in which scholars like David Wright were publishing articles criticizing the church and leading other members out of the faith. During this period, several prominent LDS scholars, including some students of Nibley, left the church over issues including the historical-critical reading of the Book of Mormon. This sent the message to church members and scholars alike that the results of historical criticism may pose a threat to the church—especially when applied to the Book of Mormon. As a result, many LDS scholars through the years have attempted to address these concerns and have continued to defend the antiquity and historicity of the Book of Mormon and thus the reputation of Joseph Smith.

In 2014 David Bokovoy, a Brandeis PhD and student of David Wright and an employee of the LDS Church Educational System, published *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy*,<sup>39</sup> which is the most recent comprehensive attempt to correlate the results of higher criticism with LDS belief and scripture within the context of continued belief and faith in the church. In his book Dr. Bokovoy carefully explains for an educated layperson—similar to Richard Elliot Friedman’s *Who Wrote the Bible?*<sup>40</sup>—the objectives and methods of historical criticism and the Documentary Hypothesis. Bokovoy then describes how a belief in this method and its results can be seen as consistent with the elements of LDS beliefs, including the ideas of an imperfect Bible, the unflinching search for truth, and seeking learning through study and faith. He argues that Joseph Smith as the prophet and restorer had the ability and authority to creatively produce new scripture. Bokovoy identifies Joseph Smith as the pseudonymous author of the books of

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38. David P. Wright, “Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in the Search for Religious Truth,” *Sunstone*, September 1992, 28–38.

39. David E. Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014).

40. Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987).

Moses and Abraham, and as a divinely inspired translator of the Book of Mormon—a text that included modern expansions.<sup>41</sup>

In his book Bokovoy quotes John Widtsoe, a Mormon apostle and scientist of the twentieth century:

To Latter-day Saints there can be no objection to the careful and critical study of the scriptures, ancient or modern, provided only that it be an honest study—a search for truth. The prophet Joseph Smith voiced the attitude of the Church at a time when modern higher criticism was in its infancy. “We believe the Bible to be the Word of God as far as it is translated correctly.” This article of our faith is really a challenge to search the scriptures critically.<sup>42</sup>

Unlike some of his scholarly predecessors who simply argue the Book of Mormon is best explained as a nineteenth-century document, Bokovoy admits for the believer the possibility of ancient authenticity. He accounts for the anachronistic features of this record by arguing that Joseph Smith in the process of translating (or producing) this ancient record, through his prophetic gifts and authority, included what Bokovoy calls “modern expansions.” He argues that his expansion theory “allows believers in the book’s ancient authenticity to explain such issues as references to Moses’s five books, as well as the citations of biblical passages that would have been unavailable to Lehi and his family.”<sup>43</sup> Bokovoy believes that the Books of Moses and Abraham produced by Smith, which are now part of the Pearl of Great Price, are best labeled as “modern pseudepigrapha.” Throughout his work, however, Bokovoy shows many authentic ancient connections he finds in these three works with the ancient world and correlates them with modern scholarship.

Bokovoy’s book is a fundamentally scholarly work that nevertheless expresses faith in some of the basic tenets of Mormon belief and yet calls into question others—including the antiquity and historicity

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41. Bokovoy *Authoring the Old Testament*, 135–37, 144–45, 161–62, 172–73, 211–13.

42. John A. Widtsoe, *In Search of Truth: Comments on the Gospel and Modern Thought* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1930), 81–83.

43. Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament*, 212.

of various parts of the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price. This book has done a great service in that it has clearly presented the possible consequences of accepting the results of historical criticism, especially the Documentary Hypothesis, as applied to LDS scripture. It is significant in that it defends the possibility of the Book of Mormon as an ancient text and at the same time suggests a way to account for some of the anachronistic material that fits within the role of Joseph Smith as an authentic prophet—creating and interpreting texts.

While there may be several points of agreement with some of Bokovoy's work, certain LDS scholars are uncomfortable with both the methodology and the results of this book. Currently there is a movement among LDS scholars to present a more nuanced understanding of the process of "translation" in terms of Smith's production of ancient texts, including the Book of Mormon and the Books of Moses and Abraham, to help explain some of the anachronisms noted by Bokovoy.<sup>44</sup> However, many Latter-day Saints and LDS scholars do not accept such a dramatic apportioning of major portions of restoration scripture as nonhistorical. We should note that Bokovoy does leave open the possibility of the historicity of the biblical figures based on oral traditions.<sup>45</sup> In addition, Latter-day Saints resist applying the terms *pseudepigraphical* and *mid-rashic* to scripture since they seem to convey the impression of falsehood and fiction. Finally, many LDS scholars sense that this approach creates a kind of slippery slope that, based on past examples, ends up with the too-facile conclusion that the Book of Mormon is a completely nineteenth-century work.<sup>46</sup>

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44. Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 173–74; Brant A. Gardner, *Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011); and Michael H. MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015).

45. Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament*, 133.

46. The above points are similarly expressed in the most comprehensive review to appear in print on Bokovoy's book: Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, "Sorting Out the Sources in Scripture," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 9 (2014): 215–72; see also the review of his book by Alex Douglas herein, pp. 229–38.

## Current state and moving forward

Times have changed for LDS biblical studies. Perhaps for the first time in the church there is a large enough community of Latter-day Saints who are trained and interested in critically reading the Bible that we can have a productive dialogue about issues of biblical critical methodology. The faculty at Brigham Young University now has more than a dozen scholars trained in subdisciplines of Old and New Testament that currently participate in their professional areas of expertise beyond Mormon studies. Currently BYU has an undergraduate major in Hebrew Bible, and a class in biblical criticism is required of all students in the major. From this class four or five students on average pursue graduate studies. Now scores of LDS men and women hold higher degrees in fields related to biblical studies. Most of these people have been educated and have an appreciation for historical criticism and—whether they ascribe to its results or not— are intensely interested in how it relates to their religion. And currently many Mormon blogs on the Internet introduce and discuss issues related to Mormon biblical studies by nonspecialists. Considering all this, I think it has become much more difficult for Mormon scholars to ignore historical criticism, but that does not necessarily indicate widespread acceptance or adoption. Some will likely continue to ignore modern biblical criticism, some will critique it, some will reject it as being “irreconcilable with their faith,” some will adopt and use certain elements of it in the defense of the faith and some, like Bokovoy, will attempt to find a common-ground compromise between historical criticism and their LDS beliefs.

Mormon studies has also entered a new and exciting phase. Educated and articulate faithful LDS scholars like Richard Bushman, a historian, and Terryl Givens, a historian and literary scholar, have produced critically acclaimed works that explore the historical and biographical background of Joseph Smith and the publication of the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price.<sup>47</sup> The church has also

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47. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (New York: Knopf, 2005); and Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*.

launched a massive and ongoing project to produce the Joseph Smith Papers; this has led to an unprecedented access to historical documents and generated much new data and many new critical studies related to the restoration scriptures. Scholars like Grant Hardy, Joseph Spencer, John Welch, and others continue to produce critical close readings of Mormon scripture employing various methods of literary, biblical, and theological scholarship.<sup>48</sup> In particular, Nick Frederick has analyzed the intertextual relationship of New Testament texts and their occurrences and meaning in the Book of Mormon using literary-critical methods.<sup>49</sup> While intertextuality by definition suspends or brackets historical questions, his work is of interest to those who are drawn to such issues and is a further demonstration of the many aspects of the Book of Mormon that can be explored through modern critical methodologies.

A detailed critical edition of the Book of Mormon is nearly complete, and several important studies are leading to a more sophisticated and accurate understanding of the Book of Mormon as an ancient text as well as engaging in its apparent anachronisms. These studies of the nature of the process of Joseph Smith's translation produced by Royal Skousen, Michael MacKay, Brandt Gardner, and others<sup>50</sup> employ the methods of higher criticism,<sup>51</sup> and they directly and indirectly address many of the issues of anachronism in the Book of Mormon and other restoration scripture raised by historical criticism. Studies such as these will help to identify and define the presence of Smith and his world embedded in his translation of ancient texts.

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48. See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016); and John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount: A Latter-day Saint Approach* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010).

49. Nicholas J. Frederick, *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016).

50. Royal Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 22–31; Gardner, *Translating the Book of Mormon*; and MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*.

51. Bradshaw, "Sorting Out the Sources," 271.

LDS scholars have a heritage that closely aligns them with literal interpretation of scripture and a keen sense of historicity. I believe that the keys for these scholars to interface with critical biblical scholarship and the historical-critical method in particular are to be found in our Mormon legacy bequeathed to us beginning with Joseph Smith. Many LDS scholars have variously applied the tools of their Mormon heritage: mastering biblical languages, seeking learning through study and faith, working with the understanding that the Bible and even the Book of Mormon may bear evidences of its human authorship and its historical context, and still seeking to find the evidence of the divine. In the end, as Smith taught, “We believe the Bible to be the word of God, as far as it is translated correctly. We also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God”—which nicely incorporates an invitation to pursue truth “by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118).

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